Using Space: Agency and Identity in a Public-Housing Development

Kevin Fox Gotham*
Tulane University

Krista Brumley
Tulane University

Recent critiques of conventional poverty research have highlighted the need to move beyond the conceptual limitations of "neighborhood effects" models and the use of the tropes of "adaptation" or "resistance" to explain the behaviors and actions of the urban poor. We use ethnographic field observations and interviews with public-housing residents to address these limitations in the poverty literature, assess competing explanations of poor people's agency, and provide insight into the importance of space as a mediating link between macrostructural constraints and locally situated behaviors. We theorize agency and identity as spatial phenomena—with spatial attributes and spatial influences—and examine how different spatial meanings and locations enable or constrain particular forms of social action and behavior. Our ethnographic and interview data depict several strategies by which residents "use space" to provide a measure of security and protection, to designate and avoid areas of criminality and drug activity, and to challenge or support the redevelopment of public housing. From these data we show that urban space is not a residual phenomenon in which social action occurs, but a constitutive dimension of social life that shapes life experiences, social conflict, and action.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade or so, poverty researchers have devoted considerable attention to identifying the demographic characteristics of the poor, their material survival needs, and the personal barriers they face to upward mobility (welfare dependency, drugs and alcoholism, mental illness, low education, and so forth). Many large-scale surveys and statistical analyses have viewed the problems of poverty from the perspective of the problems poor people pose for the larger community (e.g., low property values, criminality, and potential violence) (Kasarda, 1993; Crane, 1991; Krivo and Peterson, 1996; Krivo et al., 1998; Jargowsky, 1996, 1997). Other studies have focused on the lack of locally available job-training and education opportunities, the absence of strong resource networks, and the problems of financial disinvestment for urban neighborhoods (Elliott, 1999; Quillian, 1999; Wilson, 1996; Tigges, Browne, and Green, 1998). Yet the problem of creating, maintaining,

*Correspondence should be addressed to Kevin Fox Gotham, Department of Sociology, Tulane University, 220 Newcomb Hall, New Orleans, LA 70118. E-mail: Kgotham@tulane.edu.

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and communicating a sense of meaning and self-worth for the poor, especially poor minorities and women, has rarely been a concern. The work of Wright (1997), Wagner (1993), and Snow and Anderson (1993) on the construction of homeless identities, the observations of Anderson (1978, 1990) on urban neighborhood residents and African-American street-corner men, and, especially, the recent research of Edin and Lein (1996), Byng (1998), and Jarrett (1994) on poor African-American women represent exceptions to this tendency. However, overall, questions concerning how the urban poor attempt to construct a meaningful living space and sense of self-worth and dignity in their lives has been a secondary topic in poverty research.

Our goal in this article is to fill this void, in part, and to further understanding of the way individuals living in public housing construct a personal identity tied to place and to contest alternative meanings, degradations, and the stigma of project life. Whether by conscious political design or institutional discrimination, public housing represents, according to Massey and Kanaiaupuni (1993, p. 120), a "key institutional mechanism for concentrating large numbers of poor people within a small geographical space," intensifying the problems of social isolation and disadvantage. In the public eye, inner-city public housing is a "refuse space" (Wright, 1997, pp. 106–109) characterized not merely by physical marginality but also by social, political, and economic marginality. Refuse spaces are sociophysical spaces that carry low social status, often stigmatizing inhabitants with pejorative labels. Yet public and scholarly accounts that focus almost exclusively on the social pathologies within public housing often overshadow and direct attention away from residents' efforts to create a meaningful place and community. This article focuses on urban space as a constitutive dimension of agency and identity and examines the active efforts of the poor in mediating the effects of poverty. Few scholars have empirically examined the strategic attempts of the poor to challenge negative public images of their living space, or theorized poor people's agency and identity as spatial phenomena—with spatial attributes and spatial influences. This article begins to fill this empirical and theoretical gap using ethnographic data and interviews collected in Clara Court, a public-housing development in a southern U.S. city.[1]

A growing number of contemporary theorists view space as a basis of social action and conflict and as a central locus of identity formation (Foucault, 1977; Bourdieu, 1993; Giddens, 1990). Examining topics as diverse as gendered spaces (Spain, 1993; Haney, 1996; DeSena, 2000), racialized spaces (Gotham, 1998; Haymes, 1995; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998), the social organization of gang activity (Venkatesh, 1996, 1997), the spatial attributes of corporate interlocking directorates (Kono et al., 1998), the militarization of urban space (Davis, 1992), and social movements and political mobilization (Davis, 1999; Polletta, 1999; Wright, 1997; Zhao, 1998), scholars have delineated why space is important and how the consideration of socio-spatial relations and land-use conflicts can illuminate our understanding of social change. Although urban scholars disagree about how space influences social relations, they agree in viewing space as a means of production (i.e., land and real estate), an object of consumption, and a geographical site of social action (Castells, 1996, 1997; Harvey, 1989; Soja, 1989; Gottdiener, 1994; Lefebvre, 1979, 1991). Despite the importance of space, the spatial dimensions of poor people's survival strategies, behaviors, and actions are largely missing from the literature on poverty and "neighborhood effects" (Jargowsky, 1997). In this article, instead of asking how social action takes place in space, we adopt a dialectical perspective concerning space and action and address the following questions: How do the poor "use space" to create their own autonomous identities and

challenge externally imposed, stigmatized identities? How do different spatial meanings and locations enable or constrain particular forms of social action and behavior among the urban poor? Attention to the role of space is important if we want to understand the role of agency in understanding poverty among the poor, and the connections between macro-level processes and locally lived realities.

URBAN POVERTY AND URBAN SPACE

Recent research on urban poverty has focused attention on the role of spatial location and "neighborhood effects" in socially isolating the urban poor from education and employment opportunities, restricting avenues for pursuing upward mobility, and reinforcing antisocial behavior (Wilson, 1987, 1996; Tienda, 1991; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber, 1997a, 1997b; Geis and Ross, 1998). Acknowledging that neighborhood context shapes poverty reflects the increasing use of geographic units of analysis and spatial metaphors—"concentration effects," "spatial isolation," "ghettoized poor," "super poverty areas"—to delineate the causes and consequences of urban poverty (Jargowsky, 1997; Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Kasinitz, 2000).

In this article, however, we focus not on urban space as a container of poverty, nor as a pregiven empirical aggregate of demographic variables that affect social outcomes. Following a growing number of critical scholars, we view urban space as an object of political struggle (Lefebvre, 1991), a constitutive component of human agency and identity, and a facilitator as well as a constraint upon action (for overviews, see Wright, 1997; Gottdiener, 1994). Urban spaces shape and condition how individuals and groups think and conceive of themselves, cultivate and develop personal and collective identities, and contest as well as reinforce prevailing meanings of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other social inequalities. Scholars have investigated this conceptualization of space from a variety of angles, including the links between white racial identity and the constructed identity of the suburban homeowner (Gotham, 1998), the corporatization of urban gang activity (Venkatesh, 1997), and homeless mobilizations (Wright, 1997). Yet urban research on the spatial attributes of action and social conflict has remained distinct from recent poverty research on the role of "neighborhood effects."

Our study contributes to existing poverty research and theoretical debates on space, agency, and identity in several ways. First, we use ethnographic and qualitative data to highlight the internal dynamics of a poor neighborhood, the processes associated with living in poverty, and the role of human agency in understanding poverty among the poor. Specifically, we draw upon in-depth and up-close field observations and interviews with public-housing residents to illustrate the spatial attributes and spatial influences of human agency and, particularly, the ways residents in public housing construct a meaningful attachment to place and challenge stigmatized identities and negative stereotypes associated with project life. We conceptualize place identity construction and disavowal as variants of the generic process we call *using space,* by which we refer to the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain a personal identity tied to place and to contest alternative meanings, degradations, and stigma of residential life and space. So defined, using space may involve several complementary activities: the cultivation of spatially defined informal social networks; development of specific styles of interaction and spatial movement to satisfy material needs and obtain an array of goods and services (e.g.,

shopping for food and other essentials, schooling, child care, and health needs); provision of security and trust in the immediate area; and, construction of a place-based identity that connects and overlaps with ethnicity, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other identities.[2] As a heuristic device, the concept "using space" focuses on space as a mediating link between macrosocial constraints and actions of the poor. Furthermore, the concept sensitizes us to how individuals and groups assign interpretative and emotional meanings to spaces that "count" in influencing behavior, styles of interaction, ability to create groups, and maintain relationships. To paraphrase Logan and Molotch (1987, pp. 103–104), the specific meaning residents give to place is shaped by the ways they "use space" to make their "daily round."

Second, we develop the concept "using space" in an attempt to move beyond one-sided models that employ the tropes of "adaptation" or "resistance" to explain the social actions and behavior of the urban poor. As discussed by Wacquant (1997), Venkatesh (1997), and Wright (1997), the adaptation model has focused more on habits, routine behaviors, and recurring and unreflective patterns of action that are little more than a matter of stimulus and response, an orientation that shifts attention away from human agency and toward the structural context that shapes action. Alternative "resistance" accounts have attempted to highlight the creative and oppositional aspects of ghetto culture but lack specificity in analyzing the varying degrees of purpose and intent, maneuverability, and goal seeking shown by the poor in understanding their predicament and challenging marginality.[3] In both adaptation and resistance accounts, structural contexts are analytically separate from (and stand over against) capacities for human agency. While adaptation and resistance are important dimensions of poor people's agency, neither by itself captures its full complexity. Moreover, when scholars conflate one or another with agency itself, we lose a sense of the dynamic interplay of constraining and enabling dimensions of action. Empirically, the concept "using space" allows us to locate more precisely the connection between spatial context and the reproductive and transformative dimensions of poor people's agency. It also provides an empirical basis for understanding how "place" can become an important mechanism for creating and reinforcing one's individual and social identity, reconstructing new identities, and challenging ascribed status distinctions and outsiders' imposed social designations.

Finally, and more broadly, we argue that the most sociological attempts to theorize space have embraced a "space as container" ontology and neglected to provide an empirically grounded theory of the nature of the variable interplay between space, agency, and identity. Although dissimilar, the work of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, and Henri Lefebvre represents attempts to refashion social theory to take into account the reflexive relationship between space and social action. In stressing the enabling and constraining aspects of social structure (the duality of structure)—a central assumption of structuration theory—Anthony Giddens (1989) argues that "we cannot speak about space without talking of the spatial attributes of a substantive phenomenon" (p. 280). For Bourdieu (1977), the creation of "habitus"—the "ensemble of dispositions" that orient action and perception—occurs when people form specific codes of spatial performance through social situations (1977, p. 91, 1989). Lefebvre (1991) has developed a threefold dialectic of space that involves *spatial practices* (spatial patterns of everyday life), *representations of space* (conceptual models used to direct social practice and land-use planning), and *representational spaces* (the lived social relation of users to the built environment) (pp. 33, 38–39). Whereas Giddens and Bourdieu challenge scholars to theorize and empirically investigate

the spatial attributes of social action, Lefebvre attempts to develop a theory of space that reconceptualizes social action as spatial practice. Yet in spite of these promising theoretical approaches, empirical analyses of the spatial dimensions of agency and identity remain elusive and the notion of space as a passive environment in which social action occurs pervades the sociological literature.

In this article, our goal is to use the conceptual tool "using space" to show how the dynamic interplay among the different dimensions of agency and identity varies according to different spatial contexts of action. While Bourdieu's and Giddens's conceptual approaches have been fruitful avenues of exploring the spatial dimensions of the agency-structure problematic, scholars have criticized their perspectives for downplaying the variable nature of the interplay between agency and structure (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), advancing a weak theory of creative action (Shields, 1991), and overemphasizing routinization and repetition as the principal social practice generating meaning in space (Wright, 2000, p. 48). Furthermore, we contend that their approaches lack specificity in analyzing why and under what conditions space shapes social action and forms of identity embracement and disavowal. The advantage of the concept "using space" is that it provides an analytical and empirical basis for understanding the spatial aspects of action and identity among the urban poor. The assignment of meaning to spaces, and negotiation and renegotiation over these meanings, influences interaction, guides action, and produces individual and collective identities. That is, spatial meanings establish performative codes that relate particular forms of action and modes of interaction to specific settings. We argue that the ways the urban poor understand their own relationship to space *makes a difference* to their actions and identities; changing forms of action in relation to spatial contexts and meanings profoundly influence how actors see their worlds as more less responsive to imagination, purpose, and effort.[4]

SETTING AND METHODS

Clara Court is a high-density public-housing development in a southern U.S. city with an estimated population of 3,071 residents living in 1,403 units. As the map shows (Figure 1), the 41.45-acre self-enclosed development contains 110 three-story apartment buildings in a superblock—a single large block that exceeds standard city block sizes—that is systematically cut off from the surrounding neighborhoods. LaBelle Street, Jefferson Avenue, South Madison Avenue, and Kentucky Avenue border the development. No official paved roads connect LaBelle, Franklin, Marvin, and Williams Streets, and only three cut from Jefferson Avenue to Kentucky Avenue. Since 1995, Clara Court has been undergoing a massive $90.7 million "revitalization program" aimed at razing 881 units, constructing 94 senior housing units, and renovating 526 rental units and 150 for-sale properties in the adjacent community outside the housing development. As of November 2001, the housing authority had demolished several buildings within Clara Court, rehabilitated others, and allowed others to stand vacant and fall into disrepair. Over the last few years, the neighborhood has been a scene of controversy among residents and between residents and housing authority officials over how the redevelopment should proceed, who should control the redevelopment, and whether demolition will affect the availability of affordable housing and community ties. We explore how these conflicts connect to different meanings and uses of space in the empirical sections of the article.

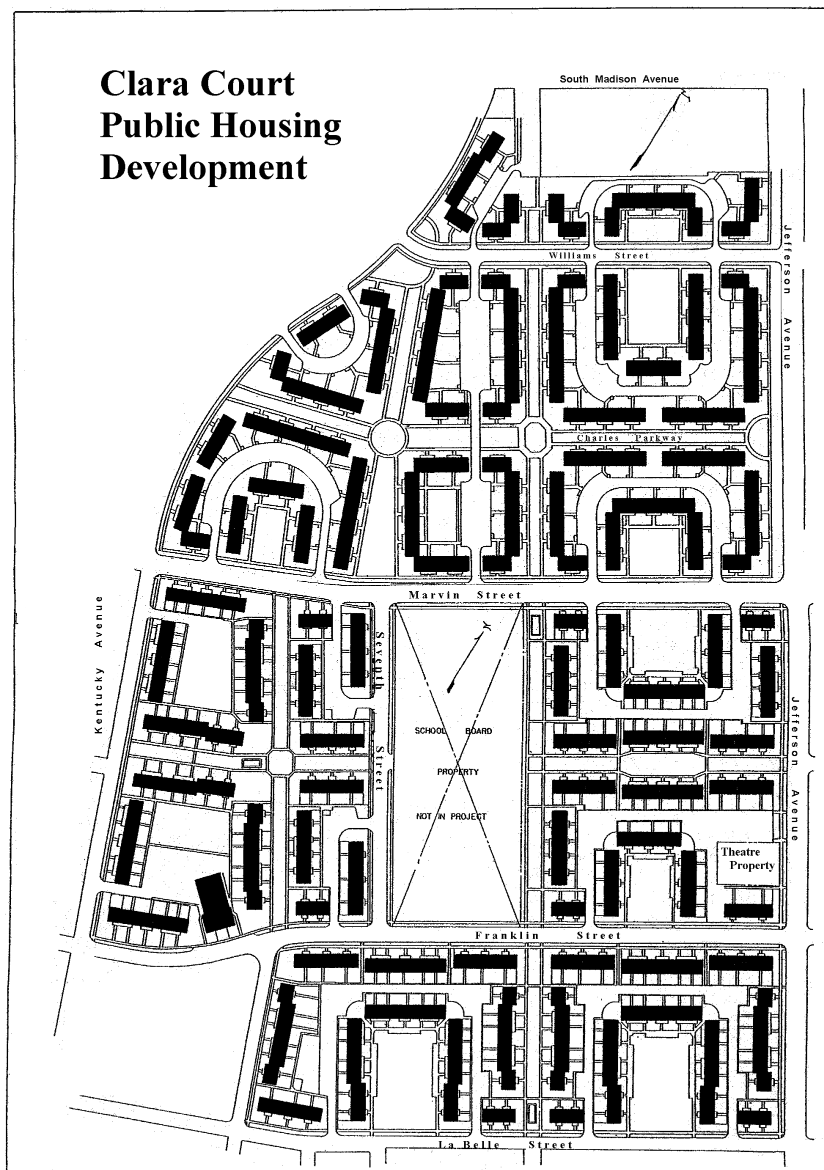

FIG. 1. Clara Court public-housing development.

The vast majority of the lease-holding adults at Clara Court are single African-American women with dependent children. The mean age of the residents is 42. Officially, less than 10 percent of the residents are adult males; unofficially, many adult men live in the development with their mothers or girlfriends. Only 25 percent of households contain a labor-force participant, and of these, only 14 percent have a full-time worker; 11 percent have a part-time worker. Almost three-quarters of the households contain children under the age of 18, and approximately two-thirds contain children of school age. Of those youth,

35 percent are preschool age (less than five years of age). As of 1998, about 70 percent of income for Clara Court households came from welfare (Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)). Currently, more than 75 percent of households receive food stamps and more than half receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In addition, 93 percent of the residents live under the current federal poverty line, 41 percent are unemployed, and 59 percent report an income of less than $6,000 per year.

The research for this project is part of a multi-year team ethnography composed of graduate students and sociology faculty working on several different research projects.[5] The two authors of this ethnographic study use long-term field observations of daily life in the housing development, including field notes from numerous public meetings, and informal and semi-structured interviews with residents from September 1, 1998, through February 1, 2000. The second author took on the role of primary data gatherer and field researcher while the first author assumed the role of a detached observer, functioning as a sideline coach to the overall project, an approach similar to the collaborative process undertaken by Snow and Anderson (1987) in their ethnographic study of homeless people.

We divided our ethnographic research and data collection into two major phases. During the first phase, from August 1998 through May 1999, the overall research strategy was for the field researcher to spend time with residents in varied settings (at their homes, at the community center, in surrounding neighborhood stores). The basic task was to acquire an appreciation for the nature of life in public housing and the ways residents managed project life both experientially and cognitively. The field researcher followed the residents she encountered through their daily routines and listened not only to what they told her but also to what they told one another. She asked questions and probed from time to time and recorded her observations and conversational exchanges in a detailed field narrative. During this period, the field researcher attended several public meetings, and undertook unstructured interviews with 26 residents. Unstructured interviews amounted to informal conversations with individuals, during which the field researcher took notes if the situation allowed and then typed up field notes based on those conversations. The first author and the ethnography team coordinator continuously monitored and responded to the field researcher's activities, observations, and notes. The field researcher and first author held debriefing sessions two to three times a week, which included discussion of field experiences, methodological and theoretical implications, and elaboration of plans for subsequent trips to the field.[6]

In the second phase, starting in May 1999, the field researcher began to supplement her field observations and unstructured interviews with in-depth, repeated, semi-structured interviews with 10 African-American females ranging in age from 32 to 78 who have lived in Clara Court for 10 years or more. The field researcher did not select a random sample of residents but gleaned referrals from representatives of community groups, residents who worked in a university-community partnership office, and other residents. The field researcher attempted to make contact not only with tenant leaders and the more "visible" population of Clara Court, i.e., those who attend public meetings and community events, but also with the "shadow" population of public housing, i.e., those who avoid public meetings, choose not to participate in community affairs, and keep to themselves rather than socialize with other residents. This helped reduce the risk of contacting only those who were well connected with tenant leaders and other local groups. In August 1999, the field researcher expanded her interview sample to include six housing authority officials, including the on-site redevelopment coordinator, the assistant director of modernization,

the director of management, the home ownership specialist, the development manager, and program coordinator.

In short, unlike most ethnographies on the life of poor people that rely almost exclusively on field observations, our research was based on encounters with individuals engaged in natural ongoing interaction and responses to semi-structured interview questions. We did not prepare in advance of the field observations a precise set of interview questions. We allowed considerable background information to emerge from the field before beginning to formulate structured questions and undertake interviews. Early in the process, we noticed that residents make quite a few distinctions about spaces in and around public housing, and organize their lives around spatial routines and spatial divisions. As field observations progressed, we paid close attention to the complexity of meaning making among residents, and their assignment of certain characteristics to different areas within public housing. We recorded their frequent use of spatial metaphors, their designations of safe and dangerous areas within public housing, and other forms of spatial stereotyping (i.e., amplification of one or more traits associated with a space) and spatial labeling (i.e., where residents deem that a place is of a certain nature). Since the field researcher had repeated interactions with respondents, she could query them about their meanings and uses of space and encourage them to expand on responses that were ambivalent and unclear. The purpose in being alert to the interplay of space and social action was to dig below surface appearances, to appreciate more fully the cultural nuances we observed (Buroway, 1991), and unravel the rich social and political texture of "everyday life" (Lefebvre, 1991) that ordinarily eludes surveys and statistical methods. Field observations and conversations with residents helped focus our subsequent interview questions and to conceptualize more carefully the critical component of our research—to "extend out from the field" (Buroway, 1998, p. 5) and move from the study of project life to shed theoretical and empirical light on the ways agency and identity intertwine with urban space.

AGENCY AND IDENTITY IN PUBLIC HOUSING

In this section, we present empirical data that offer insights into how residents within public housing cope with and seek to transform conditions of poverty. We discuss and elaborate three different strategies of using space that we uncovered in our field work. First, we discuss how residents construct "safe spaces" to provide a measure of security and protection against the risks of living in public housing. Safe spaces are settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where residents can act with dignity, independence, and autonomy. Second, we explore how residents use symbols, such as "hot spaces" and "hot streets," to delimit areas of criminality and drug activity. Both "safe spaces" and "hot spaces" are spatial metaphors used by residents to demarcate physical structures, e.g., buildings, streets, and so on, as cognitive boundary markers to guide their daily spatial movement and facilitate selective association with some individuals and groups while avoiding others. Whereas safe spaces provide a sense of trust and protection that comes with a familiar environment, hot spaces are sites of danger and potential violence that some residents avoid. Finally, we examine how residents use identity "embracement" and "distancing" talk and behavior to affirm their attachment to place or to dissociate themselves from negative images of public-housing space in response to the impending redevelopment of Clara Court. As we show, some Clara Court residents welcome the redevelopment as a vehicle to

escape public housing and disavow the "project identity." In contrast, other residents use this identity to give meaning to their actions, to challenge displacement and the resulting disruption of friendship ties and social networks. Together, these three strategies of using space function as a means of neutralizing externally imposed social identities, on the one hand, and cultivating and asserting autonomous personal identities, on the other. We contend that as actors alter or shift between these strategic uses of space they may increase or decrease their capacity for invention, choice, and transformative impact in relation to the situational contexts within which they act.

SAFE SPACES

One strategic use of space that we uncovered in our field work consists of actions taken to create spatially confined spheres of safety or "safe spaces" so as to secure a modicum of dignity, self-worth, and personal autonomy within public housing. Several residents we interacted with, Tangie (age 44), Margerie (age 47), Susan (age 33), Sadie (age 53), and Clarissa (age 33) describe public housing as unsafe and dangerous. Several have been victims of robberies or burglaries and feel they must always be on guard to protect themselves from victimization. Some harbor an intense mistrust of other residents and complain about the lack of social cohesion, the constant stress of poverty and crime, and the need to preserve order, an anxiety Rainwater (1970) found among the tenants of Pruit-Igoe. Sometimes these women condemn public housing as a whole and feel intense disdain for its social fabric. The irony here, of course, is that the intensity of dissatisfaction is counterbalanced by the fear of departure, where high costs of utilities and potential homelessness would become a reality for residents, given the proposed removal of dwelling units through the redevelopment of the public-housing development. At other times, these women intimate that they are not uniformly cynical about their community. Nevertheless, they do feel that if any safety or security is to be found, it is up to individuals themselves to provide it.

Specifically, Tangie and Margerie, both long-term residents who have lived in Clara Court for more than a decade, view themselves as representatives and leaders of the community. Both embrace a caregiver identity, monitoring the activities of other residents living near them, keeping abreast of the movement of friends and strangers. Both told us that they and other residents sit near the doorway of their apartments and survey the courtyards where the children congregate and play. They do this to show each other that they are looking out for one another's children, providing the "eyes on the street" as a source of security (Jacobs, 1961, ch. 2). At times, residents define the apartments, doorways, and porches as a safe space where they can interact with each other, to mingle and catch up with friends, to gossip, and to spend time without venturing too far from their immediate residence. In Giddens' words (1989, p. 280), these physical areas are "basic to the contextual character of interaction" and, more important, the exchange of information and the nature of communication "depends upon the regularized monitoring of aspects of physical contexts" (p. 280).

Tangie, Margerie, Susan, and others told us that they routinely offer their homes as places of refuge and safety for those who are victims of domestic abuse. Identification of oneself as a friend or protector of others occurs quite frequently, particularly among older residents. Susan told us that "my neighbors watch over us. They do. They watch over you . . . and they don't let nobody fool with us." As Margerie put it:"We look out for each

other. You know like when I was being abused at one time, a girl she looked out for me, she'd bang on the door and see if I needed help. She called the police for me. Yeah, we help each other out, we do. And she needed me when she went through some abusive type of situation, I helped her. . . . You know, I try to do what I can. . . . You know most of the time people are pretty close and they'll look out for you."

Several of the women we interacted with embrace a very specific meaning of safe space as home, porch, or courtyard. Other residents have a broad and expansive idea of space, interpreting the whole of Clara Court as a safe space to make it more livable, orderly, and protective. According to Susan, "I help the community out great. Anything I hear of, of jives or something to help the kids out, I share that information, you know. I even give cook-out, barbecues and stuff like that, with my neighbors, family, friends, everybody round here." For Sadie, reciprocity and cooperation with others in the sharing of childcare and babysitting tasks is a source of "community," as it is a sign that Clara Court is "a little town. People living together in unity." As Margerie puts it, "we're doing the best way we can given the situation of no education, no transportation. I have a car and when I see people like that I try to offer a helping hand, give them a ride or something." According to Susan and Farrah,

> Susan: Community is a group of people still living in the neighborhood, sticking together, doing things for the community . . . in my area, me and my neighbors get along like community. You know, like neighbors. Other places I don't know, but I know right here in this area where I live. Everybody is neighbors.

> Farrah (age 38): I personally believe that community is supposed to be, in my definition, a group of people that live together and work together for the betterment of places we live. I guess. I'm a part of the community. . . . That's what I'm doing here in terms of employment in the development [i.e., helping people look for jobs]. . . . As far as working together for a common purpose . . .

These public-housing residents describe themselves and others as active agents who share informal services and offer personal assistance and help to those in need.[7] Although many use the term "safe spaces" in their every-day conversations, they have different symbolic meanings of space that, in turn, influence how they think, act, and behave. Wright's (2000, p. 31) study of homeless people suggests that space is not neutral, not a container of social action, but a constitutive feature of action that has "real material importance to the production of meaning." This "fixing" of meaning "happens somewhere" to establish relationships, create the "habitus" of social life (Bourdieu, 1984), and shape perceptions of actual and imagined possibilities for social change or social order. Safe spaces are not necessarily those that are always free from danger or crime. An area is considered safe not just because of what happens there, but also because of the reputations of people who regularly use it. Moreover, a safe and protective space is not permanent; creating and maintaining it is difficult in a severely constrained social-spatial context of concentrated poverty, crime, and violence. As Sadie told us:

> Only place I really feel safe is in here. In my apartment. And you never really can be safe in that. . . . As long as I'm inside I feel somewhat safer than out there, anywhere else. . . . I'm not afraid to walk anywhere. But most of the time when I'm walking it's always in the broad daylight. I ain't gonna walk too far at night . . .

The impending redevelopment of Clara Court has cast a shadow of uncertainty over the lives of residents as they struggle to fashion a life of order in the midst of change. Where formal resources are thin, where social trust is rare and crime ubiquitous, and where there is the stigma of living in the projects that these residents know well, many withdraw from public life and keep to themselves. Sadie's description of her apartment as "safer than out there" reveals her fears and anxieties about public housing and speaks directly to the view of the immediate home environment as one of the few if only settings where she feels she has freedom and control over her living conditions. The construction of a safe space is illustrative of Lefebvre's (1991) notion of a "representational space," a realm of "lived" experiences infused with symbolic meaning and emotion that allows for the emergence of alternative ways of living and acting. In Lefebvre's (1991) words, a representational space "is space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'habitants' and 'users,' . . . who *describe* and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominated—and hence passively experience space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects" (p. 39, emphasis in original).

Some of the public-housing residents we interacted with aspire to overcome the poor living conditions they face within public housing by seeking out, and developing, ideas about how to construct and reconstruct their places as safe and secure communities. As they respond to the challenges and uncertainties of life in public housing, they attempt to "distance" themselves from adverse social conditions that constrain social identities and action. This act of "distancing" is not simply "rational" or "repetitive" but is a "spatial practice" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33) that "embodies a close association, within perceived space, between daily reality (daily routine) and urban reality (the routine and networks which link up places set aside for work, 'private' life and leisure)" (p. 38). Much as Bourgois (1995) describes how the residents and crack dealers in East Harlem are "in search of respect," the residents of Clara Court are attempting to appropriate and control space to secure a modicum of self-worth and dignity. The efforts of Margerie, Susan, Sadie, and others to create safe spaces are active attempts to increase their personal influence and control over the conditions of their life, disavow the sigma of project life, and, most important, to invent new possibilities for thought and action. The construction of a safe and meaningful living place allows public-housing residents to live as valued individuals in a publicly devalued urban space.[8]

HOT SPACES

A second strategic use of space we found in our interactions with Clara Court residents involves an active and self-conscious attempt to avoid areas perceived as containing a high degree of crime and drugs in order to disavow negative identities such as drug abuser, drug dealer, or criminal. Within Clara Court, residents use various symbolic codes—hot spaces and hot streets—as cognitive boundary markers to guide daily movement and distinguish particular areas as sites of criminality and drug trafficking. Hot spaces are areas that residents have conceptually marginalized, creating an "us" and "them" dichotomy that accepts the drug-abuser stereotype of some public-housing residents and spaces while denying that it applies to all residents or to public housing overall. In the process, residents attempt to neutralize the stigmatized identity of a drug abuser and criminal that they assign to individuals who regularly occupy the hot spaces of Clara Court. One area that

residents discuss as a "hot space" is "The Circle," a particular space known by residents as a major center of drug activity in the housing development. According to Tangie, Gillian, and Vivian:

> Tangie: It's a high concentration of people hanging out in that area. And most shootings and drug busts happen in that area. I mean you maybe go over there and you may make a mistake and offend a person. Don't go over there and be a stranger [because] they [may] think you have something [and] you're going to get robbed.

> Gillian (age 32): The Circle that's on [Charles Parkway], to me it's real dangerous. Because most of the time that you hear about crime it's down that way close to the Circle. Somebody got shot or robbed or whatever, it's down there.

> Vivian (age 33): All that is where the drugs are transacted. And I don't even much go down there myself. Even when I'm going to the store to get groceries, I go all the way to Jefferson instead of making a short-cut and go through that area.

Many areas designated as hot spaces within Clara Court are areas marked by the presence of abandoned buildings and dwellings. The geographical association of abandoned apartments and drug activity has long been a source of resident discontent and frustration in their dealings with the housing authority. According to residents we interacted with, the inability of the housing authority to do routine maintenance and upkeep creates the deteriorating spaces that attract drug dealing and other criminal activity. When Clara Court residents designate a specific territory as a "hot space" they are assigning meaning to urban space based on their past experiences and interactions with others. These experiences and interactions form the basis of various perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of particular spaces that, in turn, can affect future spatial movement and sociability as much as any physical boundary. On the one hand, the physical qualities of urban space shape peoples' behavior and styles of interaction. The layout of streets and alleys, the density of buildings, and the placement of schools, parks, and public spaces conditions the ways residents and groups move about their neighborhood. On the other hand, the symbols and meanings different individuals and groups assign to space are as fundamental to the organization of public housing as are bricks and mortar.

Consider, for instance, in the exchange below, Margerie's assignment of meaning to space to organize her daily life, to guide her movements around Clara Court, and to impute a series of undesirable behaviors with hot spaces. Her admission to being a former crack cocaine user and experience with rape suggests that perceptions of space and specific "spatial practices" are a product of spatial problem solving with solutions ranging on a continuum from habitual actions at one end to conscious actions at the other. The ability to solve spatial problems rests upon one's knowledge of the spatial location of someone or something, knowledge of which things or people are at a particular location, and when certain things will happen there or how likely it is that things might happen there.

> Krista Brumley (Interviewer): Do you think that there are specific places within Clara Court that are more dangerous than other places?
> Margerie: Yes.
> Krista: Can you tell me about those?

> Margerie: At one time I used to be on crack cocaine, years ago, and I used to go up in those areas and I would stay in them, you know like deep in the projects. Deep in the projects where people don't want to go, that's usually where the drug activities are. . . . You know where they can go in and out and hide or whatever.
> Krista: And knowing about some of these places does it affect the way you walk around the development?
> Margerie: Yes. I don't walk around the development. I used to when I used to do, but I don't walk in them any more.
> Krista: Is there any particular reason why?
> Margerie: Yep. I've been raped twice so I try to, I try to get away from trouble, you know I stay away from trouble. That's the way we do it. I don't go looking for it.
> Krista: So, in thinking about that do you think that there are specific streets that people consider boundaries where there might be consequences if you cross those boundaries?
> Margerie: Yeah. And I think the only persons that go in those boundaries are the persons that have maybe been here for a long time or may know people here. Or unless they have business in that area, but other than that I don't go in the boundaries, I don't at all.

According to Margerie and several other residents we talked with, some residents are drug dealers and abusers while others, complicit in these actions, pretend not to notice in an effort to avoid risk of retaliation and to preserve relationships with friends and neighbors. Past ethnographic work on public housing by Rainwater (1970) and Merry (1981) drew attention to how notions of "danger" and "fear" are cultural constructs imposed on a particular environment and learned as part of an understanding about the way "everyday life" works. Reflecting Anderson (1999, p. 33), who analyzes the street culture of a Philadelphia neighborhood, in places such as Clara Court, residential life has evolved a "'code of the street,' which amounts to a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence." Thus, the process of forming attitudes about which kinds of people, which places, and which times of day or night are safe or dangerous and the "cues" that are useful to identify such categories is one facet through which residents negotiate public-housing space and adopt strategies to provide a sense of safety and minimize harm. Rather than a backdrop of social actions and relations, hot spaces are a "field of action" as well as "basis for action" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 191; Giddens, 1979, pp. 202, 207). To paraphrase Rainwater's (1970, p. 46) analysis of the Pruitt-Igoe "meaning systems," the construction of a hot space by Clara Court residents offers "prescriptive and proscriptive and permissive guides to action."

The hot spaces of drug activity compel residents to fashion their personal identities in line with the dictates imposed by the drug-laden space of the housing development. To navigate comfortably through this landscape, residents have developed "street wisdom" (Anderson, 1990) as an interpretive guide for assessing others' behaviors and public actions in reference to the hot spaces that they define and avoid. Like the urban residents in Anderson's (1990, p. 231) *Streetwise,* those in Clara Court have acquired a "system for categorizing the denizens of the street and other public spaces. . . . The streetwise individual thus becomes interested in a host of signs, emblems, and symbols that others exhibit in everyday life." According to Farrah, "I know where I shouldn't be or there's too many people . . . that makes me nervous because you never know what's going to break out.

You may not have any bad things going on . . . just the idea that you don't have to be looking for trouble." Whether drug activity actually takes place at the Circle or in other areas is less important than the sense of security residents derive from feeling that their interpretation is correct. Through this "working conception of the streets" they become self-conscious and astute observers and authors of their public actions. Indeed, knowing the difference between hot spaces and less dangerous spaces is often the measure of one's "cultural and social capital" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 16) and forms the basis for residents' systems of social and symbolic classificatory schema. Not all residents avoid hot spaces. Some are infrequent visitors to such places; others are regular occupants, thereby gaining reputations based on the "character" of such areas. For others, however, the avoidance of hot spaces is exemplary of their streetwise efforts to neutralize the stigma of a drug user or "wine-head," as Rhoda (age 78) puts it, and present and sustain autonomous identities. In the process, they acknowledge the presence of drugs and crime within Clara Court while denying that the negative labels of "drug abuser" or "criminal" apply to all persons or to public housing as a whole.

CONTESTED SPACES

In this final section, we explore the use of various "embracement" and "distancing" talk and behavior by residents to confirm their acceptance or denial of the "project identity" associated with public-housing space. Embracement involves the avowal of an implied spatially based identity rather than its disavowal, as is true of distancing (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Wright, 1997). Over the past several years, the local housing authority has begun eliminating housing units within Clara Court under the Urban Revitalization Demonstration Program, or HOPE VI, a process that is underway in many public-housing developments around the nation. The official project goals include changing the "shape of public housing, through selective demolition, dedensifying the site, and creating a safe and secure housing development." Such efforts are an attempt to redevelop public housing by lessening "isolation" of residents, creating mixed income housing, and establishing "positive incentives for residents' self-sufficiency." The rhetoric employed here casts revitalization as beneficial for residents and the city and its supposed effect is to transform a deteriorating and poorly managed public-housing project into a vibrant living space.

Specifically, in the context of economic deprivation and social isolation, the redevelopment of Clara Court has become a potential resource for improving the lives of residents as well as a harbinger of insecurity and social instability. As the redevelopment has progressed, Clara Court has become "contested space" where various residents, tenant groups, and housing-authority officials claim to represent the "community" and duel over competing and contradictory meanings of public-housing space. Over the last few years, the revitalization process has generated substantial conflict between public-housing residents and the housing authority over when demolition and redevelopment will be completed, who will be forced to move, how the housing authority will reimburse residents for the cost of relocation, and where residents will live once demolition and conversion to mixed-income housing takes place. Field notes of several public meetings held over the last two years indicate substantial resident opposition to the redevelopment with residents condemning the housing authority for being insensitive to their concerns, disseminating inaccurate and conflicting information, and refusing to work with them to find affordable housing.

Many of the residents we interacted with are unsure what the future will hold for them and have mixed feelings about the redevelopment. On the one hand, several residents enthusiastically support the redevelopment because they believe that it is the vehicle for escaping distressed living conditions and, more important, disavowing the stigmatized identity of a project resident. According to one housing authority (HA) staff person, "where my younger clients say 'give me my certificate, I want out of here' . . . the older people say, 'no I am going to be back here"' (Interview, 12/15/99). As one resident put it, "my guess is that once they get us out of here, we're out of here. We ain't coming back. . . . They gonna fix these places up and they ain't about to let these wild people come back here and tear it down no more." According to Susan:

> [Some residents] talk about the renovation sometime. Some are afraid. Not me, cause I'll go out, O-U-T. Out! They doing me a favor. They, some of the people they are really afraid . . . , you know. And it's mostly older people like, I'm a young woman, I'm going to get out and do what I have to do to survive.

On the other hand, some residents express a firm desire to stay in Clara Court, despite their negative evaluations of life in public housing. According to the second author's field notes of a public meeting held in December 1998:

> One resident says she is 78 years old and her husband is 92 years old. Apparently her building is scheduled for demolition, however, she and her husband do not want to move. They have lived there since 1942. She is adamant about not wanting to move. Natasha, from [HA], responds by saying that [HA] will work with her in the relocation process. The resident repeats that she doesn't want to move and will not until "God is ready to take her." Natasha replies, "there is nothing we can do to work with you?" The resident says "no." (Field Notes, 12/2/98)

According to another resident:

> I can't afford to just pick up and move. How do I afford to live out of the development and pay electric and light for example? Because of this office, and working here, and the residents, I feel comfortable. People have lived here for a long time and they feel comfortable. I can't go anywhere else. They will have to tear the building down around me. (Field Notes, 1/25/99)

As the above excerpts show, the desire to remain in public housing is counterbalanced with feelings of entrapment and lack of real choice, given the dearth of affordable housing in the private market. While residents readily complain of the poor living conditions they are forced to live with (e.g., leaky ceilings, drafty apartments, poor public services, etc.), many fear leaving the relative security of public housing and being forced to face new financial burdens (i.e., utility bills) and potential loss of friendship ties and social networks. These voices may not represent the Clara Court population as a whole, and they may represent a sub-group that is more vocal than the general public housing population. Indeed, as our field observations and interviews show, some residents praise the ongoing redevelopment for its potential to reduce crime and create a less impoverished housing development. Others are cynical and view Clara Court as largely resistant to attempts at improvement. Still others accept the inevitability of redevelopment but fear losing the only home they have ever known. According to Vivian and Vera:

Vivian: This is where I grew up at. I would like to stay in this development, but I want another, you know, another area. Really and truly I like this project. I really do because I grew up around here from a baby. I grew up around this area. And, you know, it would be strange for me to move in another development.

Vera (age 54): I think that the residents will feel lost because they've been here so long and they just about do everything but buy clothes in the community. They [go to the] grocery store in the community, they have parties in the community, everything but buy clothes in the community. If there was a store where could buy clothes they wouldn't go anywhere else. . . . So, it's going to be a new thing. . . . Everybody's not going to be able to live in a house, they've lived so long in this place, you know. It's like a circle, you been in the circle for so long and to get out of the circle its going to be like they're lost, you know. So it's really going to be hard. You see I live in the project, but the project don't live in me because I'm not in here. I'm in here and I'm not in here, you understand . . .

Neither the metaphor of adaptation nor the resistance trope allows us to fully understand the interconnectedness of space, social action, and forms of identity embracement and disavowal among the residents. To assert that residents are adapting to their social contextual constraints dismisses the symbolic forces that motivate their decision making and the role of space in anchoring meaning and action. On the other hand, the resistance trope simplifies the agency exercised by residents because it cannot explain why some residents oppose the redevelopment while others are enthusiastic and welcome it. Indeed, not only do residents have opposing positions on the redevelopment, they tend to change their minds from time to time. Neither adaptation nor resistance accounts, by themselves, offer full insight into why some Clara Court residents attempt to disavow the "project identity" while others actively use this spatial identity (and related terminology) in constructing their identity in a politicized way, to give meaning to their actions, and challenge displacement and relocation. Our experience in Clara Court suggests that both agential processes—adaptation and resistance—are going on simultaneously and, more important, reinforce each other as residents, tenant groups, and housing authority officials battle over contending meanings of space. When residents "use space" they are not merely producing spaces, they are consuming them as symbols of security, safety, and a host of other meanings that are subject to constant challenge by housing authority officials and residents themselves, many of whom have widely different ideas of what a place should be.

In spite of the dilapidation and insecurity around them, the residents we interacted with actively reproduce as well as transform their daily lives in response to the demands and contingencies of the present. The fact that their voices take place in public-housing space and are a comment about that space resonates with Lefebvre's (1991, p. 132) observation that "discourses *about* space" influence and direct action to the extent that they are "discourses *of* space." Bourdieu's concept *habitus* highlights the normative and repetitive codes of spatial conduct but is less useful in illuminating how particular agents may contest and transcend situational frames of meaning and resist oppressive structures and subordination. Though agents produce structures in and through the medium of practice, both Bourdieu and Giddens (1979, pp. 141–145) treat structures as if dissociated from space, which they relegate to a different ontological level inaccessible to subsequent practice. To generalize from Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) criticisms of Giddens and Bourdieu and

thus make a broader point about the relationship between space, structure, and agency: If structure and agency are mutually constitutive (and hence inseparable) elements, and space is considered an exogenous or residual phenomenon, then the connection between spatial context and the reproductive and transformative dimensions of agency cannot be determined. While what we call "using space" varies in its concrete manifestations, different spatial meanings and locations are constitutive of particular forms of action, and identity embracement and disavowal. These insights should help guard against the tendency to view space as a passive environment and adopt one-sided "adaptation" or "resistance" explanations of the actions of the urban poor. Clearly, the public-housing residents we interacted with provide an empirical challenge to that tendency.

CONCLUSIONS

We have identified and elaborated three strategies of "using space" through which the public-housing residents we studied employ a series of spatial metaphors to give meaning to their actions, neutralize stigma, and construct and avow personal identities that yield a measure of self-worth, dignity, and personal autonomy. In recent scholarship on urban poverty, the role of "neighborhood effects" has been the primary conceptual framework through which researchers understand how spatial location perpetuates poverty, crime, and other pathologies associated with ghetto life. However, we have argued in this article that space has multiple dimensions and meanings, and our findings provide an empirical challenge to conceptualizations that reduce space to geographical areas (e.g., containers) within which concentrations of poverty influence the socioeconomic outcomes of individuals. By exploring the everyday life of residents within Clara Court, we have drawn attention to how space matters, not as an independent effect on poverty, but as an active force that creates and recreates social relationships of everyday life in a dialectical manner. While building upon the work of Giddens and Bourdieu, we have sought to move beyond their overly reproductive conceptions of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) and developed the analytic and conceptual tool "using space" to illuminate the spatial aspects of agency and identity among the urban poor. The public-housing residents we interacted with act and behave differently in different spatial locations—hot spaces, safe spaces, and so on—which entail different situational constraints and possibilities. Residents embed these constraints and possibilities in their practical knowledge, which they then draw upon to clarify motives, goals, intentions, and appropriate courses of action. In short, explaining why the urban poor act as they do in particular situations is impossible without understanding how space plays a major role in constituting those situations.

The case of Clara Court provides an elaboration of the importance of space as a constitutive dimension of agency and identity among the urban poor but we clearly need more research. Venkatesh (2000), Kasinitz (2000), and Vale (1997), among others, have shown that inner-city public housing, despite its diverse physical features and social attributes, is a unique spatial configuration where the state plays a fairly direct role in matters of everyday life. One limitation of our research is the lack of data on the conflicts between residents and housing authority officials over the redesign of public housing, broad policy shifts involving public-housing space, and the role of the state in "using space" for social control. As public-housing demolition and relocation continues around the country, we need more studies that incorporate the state into a critical appraisal of resistance and

adaptation models of poor people's agency. Foucault's (1993, p. 168) observation that just as "space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power" implies that power and resistance intertwine with space. Scott's (1990) research on the diverse "tactics of resistance" among oppressed groups and Wright's (1997) research on the homeless suggest that state authorities may define the very act of "survival" by subordinates as a form of "resistance." Our ethnographic research suggests that the trope of resistance masks the contradictions and ambivalence in the voices of public-housing residents and cannot explain why some residents seek out others and construct safe spaces, why some avoid contact with residents and keep to themselves, and why yet others engage in criminal behavior. Our findings suggest that future research should consider the possible ways that different actors and organized interests defend or challenge particular meanings of space and how these meanings connect to different forms of collective identity and modes of resistance.

Finally, future research should consider the interplay of spatial processes and social movement dynamics in the social life of the urban poor and other groups. Recent research has explored the ways people assign meaning to space to mediate class and racial discrimination (Byng, 1998), challenge and reproduce male dominance within institutions (Haney, 1996), build community solidarity (Gotham, 1999; Gregory, 1998; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998), and nurture collective mobilization (Feldman, Stall, and Wright, 1998). As Henri Lefebvre (1979, p. 290, 1991) has recognized, the active claiming and naming of space by a host of actors and institutions—public and private spaces, women's-only spaces, gay spaces, NIMBY conflicts—reflects a "generalized explosion of spaces" concerning the diverse ways people negotiate and renegotiate meanings of urban space to produce new identities, challenge authoritative meanings and definitions of particular spaces, and build attachment to community. Do different individuals situated on the margins or at the bottom of the stratification system use similar symbols, motifs, and cultural imagery to contest stigma, oppose spatial marginality, and challenge the separation of public and private space? Might spatial processes influence the cultural repertoires and organizational efforts of various race, class, and gendered communities? From still another perspective, how is "using space" a racialized and gendered strategy of action? These questions would begin further elaboration on strategic uses of space by various groups and would extend new interest in examining the interplay of space, agency, and identity.

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Notes

[1] We use pseudonyms for persons and locations to ensure anonymity.

[2] Most scholars agree that identities are not unilateral or constant but involve different dimensions or "layers" that interpenetrate with each other in complex and multifaceted ways (Calhoun, 1994; Nagel, 1995; Schultz, 1998). Patricia Hill Collins's (1991) work on the interlocking dimensions of race, class, and gender highlights how identity is composed of "both/and" reality as opposed to an "either/or" distinction. Like race, class, and gender, places can become important mechanisms through which people define and express a personal and collective identity (Castells, 1997; Cuba and Hummon, 1993; Milligan, 1998; Gotham, 1999). The implication is that the

content and political force of identities are intimately bound up with the meanings and symbols people attach to particular sociophysical spaces.

[3]Resistance theorists also disagree over the definitions and criteria used to determine whether an act qualifies as resistance: the outcome of the act (outcome criteria) or the actor's intention (intention criteria) (Willis, 1977; Davies, 1995; Bourgois, 1995; Fordman and Ogbu, 1986; Scott, 1990). On the one hand, using an "outcome criterion" that acknowledges only effective resistance, according to Stombler and Padvic (1997, p. 258), "conflates the act with its outcome, and thus strips all agency from actors." On the other hand, several disagreements have plagued the "intention criteria," including whether the actor or the researcher can properly and systematically identify intentions to resist and what kinds of oppositional behaviors qualify as intentional resistance (Quadagno and Fobes, 1995). The tendency to include a broad range of behaviors within the intention criteria makes the category of resistance largely bereft of observational content and thus ignores the conflictual and contradictory relationships between human agency and social reproduction (Davies, 1995; Stombler and Padvic, 1997).

[4]We want to be clear about our differentiation between agency and action. Agency itself is a dimension that is present in (but conceptually distinct from) all empirical instances of human action. Thus, we focus on public-housing residents as actors who engage agentically with their different spatial environments. We concur with Jeffrey Alexander (1992, pp. 1–2) that the "identification of actor and agency" renders one "guilty of the [fallacy of] misplaced concreteness. Rather than replacing or reinterpreting the familiar dichotomy between actors and structures, [this] identification . . . actually reproduces it in another form. . . . Actors per se are much more than, and [simultaneously] much less than, 'agents' alone." To paraphrase Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 1004), all social action is a "concrete synthesis," shaped and conditioned, on the one hand, by the dynamic element of agency itself and, on the other hand, by the spatial contexts of action. Thus, empirical social action is not *completely* determined or structured. Our conception of agency is intrinsically social and spatial since it centers around the engagement and disengagement by actors of the different spatial environments. Given these theoretical concerns, we attempt to empirically locate the relationship between kinds of agentic processes, e.g., adaptation, resistance, and their conflictual aspects, and particular spatial contexts of action.

[5]The sociology faculty and graduate students broadly shared data-collection strategies, data, and analyses. Ethnography team members undertook long-term field observations, dozens of informal conversations and unstructured interviews, and 19 focus groups with almost 100 residents. All interview and ethnographic data collected by team members were coded into several major themes, including, for example: community organizing, role of men, urban space, redevelopment, organizational culture, methodology issues, and local institutions. Within each of the major themes we devised dozens of subheadings or "code names." While the themes developed out of the specific research agendas, the subheadings or "code names" emerged during the months of field work rather than from predetermined agendas. Because of the multiple research agendas involved in this team ethnography, we developed a system to reduce data snags and minimize possible error in the coding of the data. This system of "validity checks" included: (1) regular meetings held every three weeks with the primary researchers and the coordinator; (2) biweekly meetings in between the coordinator meetings among the primary researchers; (3) continual review of the field notes by the secondary researchers and coordinator; and (4) the development of a coding system or tree. It was only through the constant reinspection of the field notes that significant code names grew out of the mundane interactions with the public-housing residents. The empirical findings in this article were reached through a multifaceted process of collecting data and coding it, repeated trips back to Clara Court to further explore the codes, and meetings with other ethnography team members and sociology faculty to compare coded notes. Ideas and codes were reached inductively through theoretical sampling, a procedure consistent with our grounded-theory approach.

[6]Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1344) note that the conscious and reflective enactment of these two roles—one of primary data collector and the other as sideline monitor of the overall research—can allow close "involvement and detachment at one and the same time, thereby facilitating management of the insider/outsider dialectic characteristic of ethnographic research." Although there are tensions in this approach (see Rollner and Emerson,

1983), we believe it is a useful research strategy for engaging in constant dialogue between theory and evidence throughout the research process, e.g., evaluation of data, assessment of conceptual tools, refinement of interview questions. This research strategy also provides the basis for triangulation in which we compare different kinds of data. In our view this is the most effective manner for handling reactivity and threats to validity.

[7]Various care-giving activities—such as offering personal assistance to those in need, sharing of informal services, and designation and use of homes as a place of refuge and safety for those who are victims of domestic abuse—belie the notion of public-housing residents as complacent, passive, and demoralized. Such accounts are consistent with past ethnographic research and qualitative studies of poor and homeless people. Liebow (1967), Wagner (1993), Aschenbrenner (1975), and Jarret (1994) highlight the importance of strong and supportive friends and family networks in the lives of poor communities. Stack (1974), Zollar (1985), and Sullivan (1992) present comparative descriptions of supportive kin and others who provide care for poor children—social activities and arrangements quantitative studies often overlook.

[8]The work of bell hooks (1990), Patricia Hill Collins (1991), and Michelle Byng (1998) corroborate our observations. hooks (1990, p. 42) maintains that throughout U.S. history African Americans "believed that the construction of a homeplace, however, fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack) had a radical political dimension." For hooks, the homeplace was one site where one could freely express oneself as a dignified individual and resist the brutal reality of racial oppression. Similarly, Collins (1991, pp. 95–96, 142, 144–145) and Byng (1998) argue that one way African-American women resist public stereotypes and racial and gender prejudices is by constructing "safe spaces" where they create their own self-definitions and self-valuations. Safe spaces, as Collins and Byng note, are institutional sites where people form cultures of resistance by constructing personal and collective identities that oppose negative images of women and racial minorities.

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