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Spaces of Encounter: Public Bureaucracy and the Making of Client Identities

Lauren J. Silver

Abstract In this article I analyze the intertwining of cultural narratives, identity stereotypes, and the material environment as these factors shape public service negotiations between clients and officials. I emphasize the material deficits, spatial barriers, and bureaucratic procedures that restrict the storylines clients and officials use to make sense of one another. This article is drawn from a two-year ethnographic study with African American young mothers (ages 16–20) under the custody of the child welfare system. I focus here on the experiences of one young mother and explore several scenarios in her struggle to obtain public housing. I argue that service deficits can be explained not by the commonly articulated narratives of client “shortcomings” but, rather, by the nature of the organizational and material conditions guiding exchanges between public service gatekeepers and young mothers. I suggest that this work advances narrative approaches to psychological anthropology by attending to the roles of social and material boundaries in framing the stories people can tell each other. [identity, adolescent mothers, public bureaucracy, service negotiation, narrative]

Researchers explore how identity mediates access to publicly provided services (Adelson 2008; Cain 1991; Mattingly 2008; Prussing 2008). Clients must present system-sanctioned identities, so that public officials will deem them worthy to receive essential services including housing and medical care. Yet neither scholars nor providers fully understand the nuanced roles of ecological conditions and cultural narratives in shaping such negotiations. Identity interactions between clients and public service gatekeepers provide fruitful terrain for understanding how inequalities and social categories are produced and contested within public offices and social service contexts. Broad trends in the delay and denial of services are related to the nature of these face-to-face interactions.

This article is situated in relation to a couple of trends in identity theory. Postmodern scholars emphasize dominant, historically specific cultural discourses as constitutive of identity (Gee 2000; Strauss and Quinn 1997; Wortham 2006). Identity is understood as an extraindividual or public representation in which there is no self outside of discourse (Linger 2005; Callero 2003; Strauss and Quinn 1997). An individual enacts her gender, sexual, and racial identities through embodying sociohistorical discourses (Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Strauss and Quinn 1997). However, some psychological anthropologists tend to emphasize the relevance of culturally derived yet individually shaped narratives influenced by an individual’s life trajectory (Linger 2005). These scholars recognize the existence of a self as a cognitive and creative negotiator and shaper of public discourses (Linger 2005). Wortham (2006) notes a lack of theory to explicitly address how local spaces affect the ways

in which sociohistorical categories are molded into contextual and flexible identity forms. This article responds to Wortham's (2006) call as I examine the role of immediate spatial boundaries on identity performances. My approach contributes to psychological anthropology through close attention to spatial and structural contexts while explaining individual and narrative elements to identity performances in social service settings.

Gee suggests that identity is constructed through social interaction involving two components: a bid by an individual and recognition of that individual as being a particular "kind of person" (2000:99). Cain (1991) emphasizes that identities are never natural. Rather, through social efforts individuals invest emotionally and cognitively in particular ways of being. Because certain identity presentations are valued more or less in given settings identity valuation is based on the interpretive frames that establish settings (Goffman 1974) or as Bruner (2008) suggests, narrative scripts. Narratives, as culturally acquired stories (Ochs and Capps 1996), provide guidance about how actions typically play out in particular settings and what kinds of people perform certain types of behaviors (Bruner 2008; Mattingly and Garro 2000; Mattingly et al. 2008).

I draw on Mattingly's (2008) concept of the border zone to inform my understanding of identity negotiations in public service contexts. Mattingly defines a cultural border zone as a space where social actors are unclear of each other's actions and motives. A border zone takes shape when interacting individuals draw on cultural narratives that are at odds with one another. In other words, an individual's bid for identity recognition is not always interpreted through the individual's preferred storyline. At the border, clients and officials interact, yet they interpret each other's actions through alternative narrative scripts. In the United States at these borders, identities are negotiated through constructions of difference (i.e., around race, class, age, and gender). These sorts of encounters tend to reinforce cultural distinction and identity stereotypes, rather than promoting shared understanding and intimacy. According to Mattingly (2008), border zones are constructed through two social processes: (1) differences in interpretive storylines and (2) identity differentiation through stereotyping. As Strauss and Quinn (1997) suggest identity stereotypes are cultural models, or shared schema, for understanding particular "kinds" of people. The authors maintain that stereotypes can be reinforced (at the border), as individuals tend to assimilate new experiences and storylines through already established cultural models. Those who are stereotyped do not even have to internalize or believe the models to be vulnerable to their effects. However, these borders are not inflexible, as contextual experiences can accommodate or negate preexisting stereotypes (Strauss and Quinn 1997). In this article I focus on the mechanisms by which borders are rigidified and in other instances crossed in public service encounters.

My study contributes to Mattingly's border framework by exploring the ways in which bureaucratic procedures and sociospatial conditions inform cultural narratives and identity negotiations at the border. In other words, I argue that even as the border is constructed along rifts in participants' disconnected storylines, it is also reinforced through structural hindrances in the service environment. My emphasis on the constitutive role of immediate

spatial context draws on the work of Duranti (1994) and Goodwin and Duranti (1992). Goodwin and Duranti (1992) conceptualize context along several dimensions including, but not limited to, social and physical setting, the way bodies are situated in relation to one another, and sociohistorical discourses. Analyzing talk, the authors suggest that contextual dimensions are not only constitutive of an unfolding speech event but also contribute to the ways in which agents derive meaning about the event (Goodwin and Duranti 1992). My case study similarly demonstrates the relative roles of body positions, spatial setting, and cultural discourses in shaping narrative events, identity negotiations, and the social meanings inferred.

In this article, I draw my analysis primarily from a case study of Nyisha, a young mother on the verge of turning 21 who was aging out of the child welfare system.¹ She sought access to publicly subsidized housing to ease the transition for herself and her three-year-old son, Malcolm. The ethnographic case elucidates how the cultural scripts that inform service negotiation are mutually constructed yet also are firmly entrenched structurally through cumbersome procedural protocols and spatial inequalities. Through structures that disempower individual storylines, mothers are positioned in ways that hinder their ability to actively shape the parameters of service provision. The stereotypical storylines explored here have material consequences as they predict limited access to essential services. I suggest that service deficits can best be explained not by the commonly articulated narrative of client “shortcomings” but, rather, by the nature of the organizational and cultural contexts guiding exchanges between officials and young mothers.

Study Context and Methods

Young mothers learn “to do public assistance” at housing offices, health clinics, subsidized childcare offices, and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) offices, among many other spaces. An encounter involves a negotiation between a client and a public representative for a particular resource or service in which the public worker serves as a gatekeeper to the potential offering. The case study emphasized here is drawn from a two-year ethnographic study in a large, northeastern U.S. city. The study highlights a particular population of public service users: African American young mothers (ages 16–20), who are living under the custody of an urban child welfare system. The court places these mothers along with their children in a Supervised Independent Living (SIL) program, where the young mothers live with their children in community apartment buildings. The SIL program is administered by Visions, a private nonprofit agency. Because the city’s child welfare agency provides approximately 85 percent of the total funds used to run SIL, the program is designed in accord with public priorities and expectations.² Clients are expected to meet standards related to educational attainment, part-time employment, parenting goals, and adult-readiness skills (incl., e.g., the ability to budget, manage a household, and seek and negotiate health care). SIL staff members are responsible for assisting the clients to meet these outcomes. The mission of the program is to support the transition of young mothers from dependence on the child welfare system to autonomous and contributing adulthood.

Here, I focus on one 20-year-old African American mother, Nyisha, and her three-year-old son, Malcolm. I accompanied ten young mothers across multiple public offices, medical facilities, childcare programs, schools, court, and other service contexts.³ I sought to understand mothers' service trajectories as well as how different sociospatial settings informed young mothers' identities and their access to resources. Each of the ten focal mothers also participated in an extensive, semistructured qualitative interview, which I conducted and audio-recorded.⁴ Interviews covered a variety of topics, including the young mother's background, her experiences in the SIL program, her ongoing experiences with school, her history with the child welfare system, and, if relevant, her interactions with the juvenile justice system. Interviews also addressed each mother's future goals for herself and her child (or children).

Nyisha was one of my ten focal participants. This article highlights Nyisha's experiences with the public housing authority (PHA), yet it links particular instances of service engagement to broader trends that I discovered in my fieldwork.

My unique role shaped my methodological approach and the nature of the knowledge I gained. I had worked previously for one year as a program manager for the SIL program. During that time, I became familiar with several young mothers, including Nyisha, and staff who two years later participated in my study. Given my practitioner knowledge, I chose to participate directly in many of the service negotiations that occurred during my research. Through documentation and analysis, I was able to examine my multiple roles in the field and the assumptions I used to guide my practice. As soon as possible after leaving service settings, I wrote detailed field notes to document the events and interactions in which I participated. Then, I interpreted my own practices as data along with the perspectives and practices I observed among other providers and young mothers. I was a visible and active social participant in the scenarios that I analyze here. My positioning is revealed directly as I make apparent how my unique identity informed the unfolding events.

In this study, young mothers' lives occur at the interface of several public bureaucracies including the health, mental health, education, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems. Once youth are taken under the custody of the umbrella child welfare agency, their lives become managed. Management is fragmented, as it is divided across service systems that tend to work in isolation from one another (McLaughlin et al. 2001). Mothers are not trusted to navigate these systems and negotiate on their own behalf. They must rely on this complicated service network.

Once mothers' lives become "cases," they are required to rely on the advocacy of multiple officials across a number of fragmented public systems. Young mothers are compelled to learn strategies for moving through systems, offices, and programs and for securing assistance from their workers. They must become effective "narrative mind readers" (Mattingly 2008) as they interact with public gatekeepers across a number of different settings. Accurate predictions about how others will interpret their presentation of self are essential if mothers hope to positively influence officials' judgments of their care. Negotiations involve

struggles between mothers and officials around identity bids and recognitions. Yet these negotiations are configured along a distinct power differential, as services such as housing, childcare, and education are not considered public entitlements for late adolescents under the “care” of the state. Rather, services must be earned through demonstrations of responsibility and success and, ultimately, becoming recognized as a particular system-sanctioned identity, “the deserving victim.”

I turn now to Nyisha’s story.

Nyisha’s Story

For most of Nyisha’s life, her mother had been abusing drugs, and was in and out of prison and sometimes homeless.

Nyisha: Yeah, it was just hard. I didn’t have nowhere to go. I was 15 and anyone would just tell me to get out in a heartbeat. You got to go. I don’t want you any more, get out of my house.

Author: That’s a tough situation to have to deal with.

N: That’s when I started the [illegal activity]

A: Because you didn’t have any place to go?

N: I had nothing! I had no money to feed myself. I had no money to buy clothes. School was definitely not an option because I couldn’t be worried about it. I couldn’t even eat, I mean couldn’t even get myself something to eat let alone buy books to go to school . . . Some people would take me up for a little while, treat me like crap. But I don’t have nowhere to live, so I would take it. I really didn’t have nowhere to go.

At age 15, Nyisha went to work for an older brother’s wife, who she said she had looked up to as a role model. Nyisha was manipulated into performing illegal activity and was caught, locked up for a while, and then put on probation. It was her probationary status, which brought her to the attention of a large, urban child welfare system and she was considered eligible for the SIL program. At the time of the events reported in this article, I had known Nyisha for three years, since she was 17. When I worked as a SIL program manager, I had counseled Nyisha in the aftermath of a traumatic event in her life. Nyisha had been gang raped and she was unwilling to speak to a therapist but agreed to talk to me about her feelings. Two years later in 2004 when I began the research for this project, Nyisha and I quickly reestablished our rapport and I learned about the trouble she had been having around securing housing. Even though she had been working steadily at a variety of low-wage retail

jobs, her ability to support herself and her three-year-old son without additional public support was precarious.

Nyisha was quickly approaching her 21st birthday and was making preparations for her transition out of the child welfare system.⁵ This was a tenuous time for her. On her birthday, she would be discharged from child welfare because of her age, and she would no longer be eligible to receive SIL services. This change in status meant she would need to secure housing, healthcare, and sufficient resources to support her son, Malcolm, and herself.

One of the greatest challenges facing youth who transition out of the child welfare system is finding affordable housing. Youth who age out of child welfare are particularly at risk for long-term homelessness (Keller et al. 2007; Courtney et al. 2001). Over time, I consistently witnessed many of the young mothers who were transitioning from SIL struggle to acquire housing. Affordable housing was a key impediment to the successful transition of many mothers to “self-sufficiency.” For example, I observed that some mothers and their children returned to the same family homes from which they were originally removed, and others were discharged from SIL to homeless shelters. An inability to afford city rents without public assistance leads most mothers who age out of SIL to seek publicly subsidized housing from the local PHA. Nyisha hoped to secure publicly subsidized housing. She had followed the appropriate steps of the public housing protocol (filling out a number of different forms and providing multiple sources of verification, as well as participating in a housing interview).

The Undeserving Client?

In early July 2004, during data collection, I tape-recorded an interview and discussion in which Nyisha informed me that she was denied housing because of a PHA error. The entire interview occurred in Nyisha’s SIL apartment and lasted three hours while her son Malcolm played and occasionally distracted us with various requests or demands on our attention. At the time of the interview, Nyisha did not have a case manager, as Alise, who had been her worker, had recently left the agency.⁶

Nyisha: When I was there at the [housing] interview, [the worker said] “you have a balance of \$1,200.” “Excuse me,” [Nyisha responded]. “You have a balance from 1993.” I said, “I was born in 1983 and in 1993 I was ten.”

Author: Did you say, “That’s my mother?”

N: Yes, I told them, “That’s my mom.” “Well, it’s coming up under your name . . .”

A: Well then . . . it’s a problem that they need to correct. It’s not your fault.

N: It’s not, but they seem [to think] like it’s the biggest problem in the world.

A: Right, well you know how (pause) this is what you do, you have to have an advocate with you.

N: They won't listen to me.

A: Like you said, you're young and they're not listening to you, which is a problem. It's not right and it shouldn't happen but it does.

N: Like Alise kept telling me to call, call, call. I said, "Alise I have been calling. They always get ignorant with me . . ." Then I told her [referring to the PHA worker] my situation. She said hold on and put me on hold for 45 minutes. She thought I was going to hang up and I never hung up. She said, "Oh, I apologize, I forgot you were on hold." How professional is that? You forgot I was on hold. I'm thinking in my head, "Whatever, you were hoping I would hang up." So she put my name in the computer and the same thing came up, "You owe a balance." I said "No, that was the problem in the first place, I don't owe a balance. It's my mother." [The PHA worker said] "I can't do anything about that. This is who you need to call," [which she said] with an attitude.

A: So you called that other person and then what happened?

N: With an attitude, "I can't do nothing about that so I don't know why she gave you my number." I had Alise call. I mean they gave her as much cooperation as possible. That's wrong. I mean I am young, I'm not dumb, and I'm not anxious. Because if I was anxious, I had my [housing] interview in January, I'd have been on your heels back then. I mean this is like what I need . . . I'm not saying like, "OK, where's my money? I need my money so I can go clothes shopping." This is serious.

Nyisha reacts to the naturalized and dominant narrative or cultural model (Strauss and Quinn 1997; Strauss 1992; Quinn and Holland 1987) of the undeserving, poor, young, black mother, characterization that is rendered in the prejudgment she perceives from the PHA workers. This icon is an internalized projection that Nyisha appears compelled to resist. As she differentiates herself, the stereotyped construction of the "Other" becomes apparent. Nyisha is in dialogue with two categories of identity: the "kind of person" (Gee 2000:99) who deserves or does not deserve public assistance. Nyisha makes an identity bid with me and perhaps with her self, as the "kind of person" who is "worth" assisting. She also defines housing as an essential or "serious" need. However, as Katz (2001) mentions, housing is not considered by the state to be a public entitlement. Nyisha felt an obligation to justify both her need for housing provision and her worth as a responsible, reasonable, and rational individual. While she does not specifically invoke race, she implies an identity that is distinctly visible through class, race, age, and gendered terms.

Later during our conversation, she stated directly that her race was an issue, "I was like I don't want to be one of those welfare moms, I don't want to be a part of the statistics . . . it's

already bad enough I'm African American." Nyisha sought to define her identity as separate from the welfare mom stereotype (Strauss and Quinn 1997). Through encounters with PHA caseworkers, Nyisha implied that her identity had been constructed as what Mattingly has called a "familiar stranger" (Mattingly 2008:145). Mattingly (2008) explains that familiar strangers are created based on flat, stereotypical cultural scripts. These narratives draw on demographic categories (i.e., race, class, and gender) as narratives are used to predict the actions of individuals who are not known personally. However, these predications misrepresent the full complexity and context of an individual's behavior. When Nyisha contends that it is "bad enough" being African American, she implies that her racial identity alone makes her susceptible to stigma, discrimination, and low social status. Critical race theorists acknowledge the pain and frustration people of color experience as they are compelled to negotiate dichotomous good and bad black identities (Farley 2002), in this case, the deserving and undeserving black welfare mother identities. Farley (2002:140) suggests that both roles are "identity traps" that reinforce the rules and organization of broader systems of inequality.

Nyisha and I both understood that her request for housing would not be considered seriously unless an adult advocate or manager accompanied her to the PHA office. During the conversation, we both expressed frustration that clients tend to be discounted by workers. Yet each of us understood that Nyisha would need an adult advocate to have her "case" considered. In the roles of both researcher and advocate, I volunteered to accompany Nyisha to the local PHA office. Several days after the interview, Nyisha, Malcolm, and I visited the local PHA office.

Constructing the Border: Producing Identities in Conflict

As we walked into the PHA office, we noticed two service areas on either side of the room and each service booth had a glasslike partition separating the workers in the back space from the public who waited in the front space. There was a group of assembled chairs with people waiting across from the partitioned zones and a stairway in between the two service areas, which wound to upper level offices. Nyisha, Malcolm, and I stood fixed looking at both booths and I randomly moved toward the booth with no line from which we were directed to the other one, where a line had already formed. This production of space is charted through physical signifiers that have emotional and social consequences. The partition is a replicable fixture across public service sites recurring throughout in the city, establishing a distinct boundary between public workers and clients. It muffles voices, compromising clear communication and exchange. I had noticed similar partitions at the child welfare administrative building, as well as at shops and corner markets in inner-city neighborhoods. How do physical boundary signifiers shape the identification bids and recognitions between clients and public officials?

After waiting in line for some time, the female PHA worker opened the window in the partition and Nyisha explained how she had applied for housing but was denied because of a bill

her mother owed. The official's gaze remained fixed on her computer screen, and she did not directly acknowledge us. She asked for Nyisha's social security number, typing it into the computer. The worker stated that her records indicated Nyisha owed \$1,200 to the PHA. Nyisha calmly responded that she did not owe the PHA, as she was ten years old at the time the debt was acquired. She continued to explain that it was her mother who had accrued the debt and that this was the mistake she had been trying to correct over the phone. The worker abruptly interceded and stated in an annoyed tone that the letter Nyisha received indicated she would have to apply for a hearing if she wanted to contest the denial. Nyisha replied that she had not received a letter. The worker brusquely asked how then did she know about the denial? Nyisha began to explain that she lives in an SIL program and the agency had been talking to the PHA on her behalf. The program probably received the letter about the need for a hearing, Nyisha continued, without her knowledge.

I asked the woman behind the partition whether we could talk to a supervisor to explain Nyisha's situation in private. I was aware of the long line of women behind us, the public display created as we conversed back and forth, and this worker's apparent lack of interest in helping Nyisha. I also knew that if we were to have any chance of getting the denial reversed quickly, we would need to articulate details "to justify" the request. I didn't want Nyisha's vulnerabilities exposed to a crowd of onlookers. The worker abruptly responded that she was indeed the supervisor and she refused my request. I pleaded with her, emphasizing the time-sensitive nature of this issue and that we simply wanted to discuss other options. The expressions on both Nyisha's face and my own must have been particularly desperate because the woman hesitatingly agreed to our request, telling us that we would have to wait. We later learned it was unorthodox for this supervisor to be attending to the front desk, and her presence was necessitated on this particular morning because her entire staff was attending a training session. She usually works from her administrative office located in a private area in the building, unexposed to public inquiries.

Evidently, the past conversations with PHA workers mentioned in Nyisha's interview had not been documented and, therefore, did not exist in the public record. Scott (1998) contends that it is through administrative processes, including record keeping, that officials are able to maintain power. These acts produce a form of official reality that tends to ignore certain messy or contradictory aspects of service provision. All previous attempts initiated by Nyisha to get the records corrected were invisible and, thus, futile. The only accounts in existence were those documenting the actions explicitly initiated by the PHA, including the letter regarding Nyisha's denial and communication of the need for a hearing. The documentation of PHA initiatives places the institution in a position of power and in control of the negotiation while the absence of records pertaining to Nyisha's initiatives, constructs her personal agency as invisible and inconsequential.

Several weeks prior, Nyisha had described to me the general social dynamics of her phone conversations with public housing officials, including her perception of being prejudged as "dumb" and being addressed by workers who used a curt tone. Furthermore, she bemoaned her lack of power in negotiations. She attributed this lack of power to public officials, who

misperceived her behaviors as deficits and also having to rely on SIL staff who did not always complete their job responsibilities. The cultural scripts she had described previously were repeated in the current scenario.

In the demarcated context of the PHA front office, Nyisha and the PHA worker constructed a border zone through ritualized interactions. While the border is constructed because of inconsistencies in storylines used by Nyisha and the worker, it is reinforced through physical boundaries and structural inconsistencies. The physical partition muffled communication and hindered connection. The physical presence of a long line of women waiting behind us also hindered sustained attention. These physical circumstances reinforced “familiar stranger” constructions from each of us. The worker’s storyline seemed to indicate that Nyisha was just another client who had not appropriately followed the official protocol: Nyisha had not applied for a hearing. Nyisha and I constructed the worker as just another uncaring and rude official. Nyisha made a bid to be recognized as a respectful client, who had every intention of complying, yet had failed because of circumstances outside of her control: SIL staff had not notified her of the need for a hearing.

At the time of this interaction, requesting a hearing would have been unfeasible because Nyisha was to be discharged from the SIL program in two days time. Furthermore, Nyisha again emphasized the PHA mistake, which erroneously led to her housing denial. In Nyisha’s and my own storylines, the mistake was because of the PHA’s recording error and could be easily corrected by the official. Yet the mistake, whatever its nature, was inconsequential to the worker. According to her, following the official protocol was the only legitimate way to contest a PHA decision. Thus, the disconnected storylines were reinforced through structural barriers.

It was as if the physical boundary presented by the partition in the public space signified that emotional and social boundaries needed to be upheld between officials and clients. In other words, the physical layout of the space contributed to the disconnected storylines used by Nyisha and the worker to explain each other’s behavior. Because housing need and requests in the city far exceed public housing resources, some requests have to be denied. A partition becomes functional for the system’s officials, as it tends to keep those who are poor and economically needy at a distance. On an everyday basis, PHA workers come face-to-face with many individuals for whom they are unequipped to provide assistance. Compassion and connection would be overwhelming for those workers, as the public housing system is not funded to serve all those who are in need. Even after applications are accepted, women can remain on waiting lists for years before receiving a residence.⁷

The housing protocol includes a sequence of rigidly defined tasks that must be executed accordingly. The protocol maintains the legitimacy of the PHA, yet it does not account for unique personal circumstances and organizational barriers (such as unavailable caseworkers and lack of communication among SIL and PHA caseworkers). Protocols and documentation are cultural tools for deciding who will get services. They are used to mediate officials’ decisions and enable public gatekeepers to justify the rationing of resources. These tools

assist in the creation of cultural borders. In fact, in my broader study, I found that rigid protocols also restrict access to childcare and healthcare for young mothers and their children. Prussing (2008) explains similar bureaucratic processes in the context of federally funded mental health agencies serving a Northern Plains reservation. She found that bureaucratic tools limit the discourses and practices that are considered legitimate. Structural pressures embodied in protocols and documentation processes inhibit the capacity of service systems to respond to complexities in clients' lived experiences (Prussing 2008).

An Entitlement Narrative

While we waited for the supervisor to meet with us, Nyisha expressed her sense of relief that I had accompanied her. She continued to explain that it would not have occurred to her to request a private meeting. The interaction would have probably ended at the partition and Nyisha would have left the office in the same predicament as when she had entered. Furthermore, even if she had asked for a private meeting, her request may very well have been rejected because of her low status and characterization as a young, black, poor, female client. Even my request coming as it did from a white, apparently middle-class advocate may have been denied, if we had been speaking to just any worker instead of the supervisor herself. Thus, it was only through exceptional circumstances that we were able to co-construct an unusual storyline, which included a private meeting with the supervisor. Carbado (2002) describes a cyclical process in which institutional injustices perpetuate privileges and disadvantages along racial lines. These inequalities become embodied and enacted through individual identities. The identities then serve to perpetuate the system-level injustices (Carbado 2002). My own and Nyisha's identities reflected system-level inequalities and perpetuated our relative privileges and disadvantages. My identification as a professional, white woman conveyed a sense of entitlement to being acknowledged and to having my concerns addressed by public institutions. This identity also offers me an empowering platform from which I chose not to accept the initial denial and I continued to push for additional consideration. Nyisha's marginalized identity, her youth, and her history of being treated within public systems as undeserving did not afford her the same sense of privilege or the right to ask for a private discussion.

Nyisha's reactions were similar to those of other mothers whom I had accompanied in social service, medical, housing, and educational settings on multiple occasions. I pushed against standard protocols for further action. Several mothers similarly shared their relief at my persistence on occasions when we worked together, also saying it would not have occurred to them to press certain issues. I capitalized on these discussions as educative moments and would explicitly communicate my sense of entitlement to service as a strategy that the clients could also employ. I later became aware of several of these mothers using such assertive tactics on their own. Thus, while entitlement to consideration was embodied by me and communicated in my actions, I found that an entitlement narrative could be taught and practiced by the mothers. In other words, critical consciousness around entitlement could to

some degree create openings for identity negotiation. Later in this article, I explore an occasion in which Nyisha employed assertion as a strategy.

Changing the Storyline: Connecting across the Border

Surprisingly, we didn't wait long for the supervisor and Nyisha, Malcolm, and I were escorted to her back office. As we walked down the winding hallway, I thanked the supervisor for meeting with us and she provided a curt acknowledgment. In the office, Malcolm sat on my lap and Nyisha sat next to me. The three of us were on the same side of a table facing the supervisor who sat across from us in close proximity. Nyisha explained again, in a more apprehensive tone, her situation and her imminent discharge from the SIL program in two days' time. Placed in front of her on the table, the supervisor had a hard copy of Nyisha's PHA file and shortly into the review the supervisor's affect began to change. She started to treat us respectfully and her communication style shifted almost instantaneously after moving into her inner office. She very pleasantly exclaimed, "I'm sorry I never introduced myself. I'm Rachel Coleman," extending her hand to us.

Ms. Coleman's tone of voice elevated, the expression on her face turned pleasant, and she began to give us more eye contact. Ms. Coleman was African American, apparently in her mid-thirties, and later during our meeting, we learned that she too had a young son around Malcolm's age. She was dressed professionally in a dark pantsuit and her hair was cropped close to her head. After making a phone call to a PHA administrator at another site, Ms. Coleman learned that she had the authority to override the housing denial without a hearing. The conversation was on speaker and when Nyisha and I heard this, I squeezed her knee and we looked at each other with huge smiles. Ms. Coleman immediately pulled up her housing database and started searching for a residence for Nyisha and Malcolm. Nyisha exclaimed, "Oh my god, I can't believe this! I was so stressed."⁸ She covered her mouth and began to cry.

The scenario demonstrates how a sociospatial setting can support the restructuring of guiding narratives and communication patterns between public officials and clients. However, even as the physical space and bureaucratic processes are constitutive of communication events, these contexts are not deterministic (Duranti 1994; Goodwin and Duranti 1992). Ms. Coleman's personal agency and organizational status were essential, as it was her prerogative to change the spatial context and to meet with us in her private office. Nyisha and I were only able to indirectly affect Ms. Coleman's decision.

The seemingly uncaring, rude "familiar stranger" became Rachel Coleman, a sympathetic, compassionate supporter. The transformation followed our entrance into a more intimate spatial realm, without the normal boundary signifiers in place. The protocol provides a medium from which to organize the narratives and rituals of interaction between public officials and clients. The protocol creates the illusion of an impenetrable, cohesive, and "encompassing" system (Ferguson and Gupta 2002:981). However, the rigid protocol was

not unbending in actuality, as Ms. Coleman was able to swiftly override it. Thus, the border zone resulted not so much from an inability to understand one another but, rather, through structural and physical occlusion (through the protocol and the partition). In the front office space, Ms. Coleman experienced the imperative to protect the legitimacy of the PHA agency by not appearing to favor Nyisha over other applicants. She was under the surveillance of other officials and the broader public. Once these situational and physical boundaries were removed, we all engaged more freely and were able to communicate different aspects of our identities. Hence, this shift reveals how narrative scripts are derived from spatial patterns and immediate context.

Ms. Coleman and Nyisha connected across a cultural border and created a relaxed, more intimate social climate within the private office. In fact, they reflected and communicated explicitly with one another about their social performances earlier that morning in the front office space. Ms. Coleman jokingly exclaimed that she almost had to throw Nyisha out; she was hollering so loudly up front. Nyisha zealously and swiftly responded, "Oh no, I was trying to use big words and I wanted to be really polite but I was so nervous!" Ms. Coleman looked at Nyisha with a grin that appeared at once friendly and a bit patronizing. She exclaimed, "You know I'm just joking with you; you were actually quite good." Nyisha continued adamantly, "I know you deal with a lot of 'ignorant people' and I was trying really hard not to be one of them; but I know the words just didn't come out right." Ms. Coleman interjected once again to emphasize that Nyisha did a fine job. By doing this in a joking way, she both affirmed Nyisha's assertiveness and her own power to make a decision about whether to accept her plea.

Both Ms. Coleman and Nyisha engaged the cultural model of the "ignorant" welfare mother. Through language and behavior, Nyisha works her identity (Carbado 2002) to repudiate any personal association with the stereotyped icon. Nyisha's struggle to present a worthy identity is indicative of the pain associated with negotiations at the border (Walkerdine 2006). Walkerdine argues, "the guarding against the Other position is painful and frightening" (2006:18), and there is no place for certain types of expressions or mistakes that could be used as confirmation of the Other. Nyisha worked hard to avoid being construed as the stigmatized Other, the same identity she had struggled to avoid several days earlier during our interview.

This dialogue was only safely embraced through continued efforts to demarcate social status differentials. Within this intimate social space, Ms. Coleman explicitly establishes her identity as someone who is in the more powerful position to judge individuals like Nyisha. Yet she evaluates Nyisha as the "kind of person" (Gee 2000:99) who deserves public assistance. Again, this transformation seemed to occur instantaneously after moving into her inner office. Nyisha immediately responded in a way that showcased her efforts to differentiate her own identity from the stigmatized Other. Ms. Coleman and Nyisha engaged in a common narrative to establish Nyisha as a deserving client. Thus, identity is ascertained through a relationship between positions; Nyisha can only be a deserving client in relation

to the construction of this undeserving icon (or “ignorant” client, as Nyisha refers to it). Yet the stereotyped cultural model is preserved, as both women engage it.

Even as the border zone is socially constructed, it is not easily transgressed. It is constantly enacted through cultural scripts of what it means to be a client and what it means to be an official and reinforced through physical boundaries and cumbersome procedures. It took several unusual and unpredictable circumstances to enable us to attain a private meeting. Similarly, in Mattingly's (2008) emergency room scenario, the mother received care for her sick daughter only after she had transgressed the normative spatial boundaries of the clinic. In general, structural and spatial occlusion prevents social actors from breaking out of confining narratives that otherwise perpetuate service delays and denials. Thus, the housing protocol leads to material deprivation for the many families who are unable to follow or successfully present their case within rigid procedures. The unusual circumstances of the author accompanying Nyisha and of Ms. Coleman being at the front desk led to a connection between Nyisha and Ms. Coleman, across the border. This interaction, by transcending spatial boundaries and protocol, reveals in full the socially constructed and maintained nature of the public housing process.

Frustrated Fulfillment

Lastly, we were directed to another PHA administrator's private office. Mr. Allen, a white administrator in the PHA, finalized the housing assignment for Nyisha and Malcolm. He handed her documentation making it official and telling her not to lose this paper, as it is “gold.” Nyisha left the PHA in very high spirits only to be disappointed a couple of days later on our visit to the assigned PHA high-rise building.⁹ A group of about 12 young men stood in front of the building. As we approached her assigned apartment, I noticed that the door handle to the unit was missing. The apartment was industrial in style with limited lighting, creating a dim, foreboding atmosphere. The floor was composed of cold gray cement and the walls were built of cinder blocks. A tall, dark fence encompassed the entire outside balcony so that very little natural light entered the apartment. The kitchen appliances looked rather decrepit and the cabinets were uneven. The exhaust above the stove was missing and wires were sticking out from the ceiling. In my field notes, I noted a tone of desperation as Nyisha muttered, “Oh my god, I can't live here!” She took my hand and said; “Lauren, do you see this place?”

Knowing it would be unorthodox, I suggested we try to get the assignment changed and we decided to return to the PHA office immediately.¹⁰ It began to rain violently as we drove away and the steady downpour created an ominous atmosphere that seemed to reflect the depressed mood in the car. Nyisha uttered in a barely audible voice, “Did you see all those guys? And you know, after what happened to me, I just feel really scared.”¹¹ She said she would be too afraid to enter the building after dark and would be petrified living there alone with Malcolm. I suggested she communicate honestly these feelings to the PHA administrators, just as she was doing with me. I guided Nyisha to be open about her

vulnerabilities, as I implicitly knew she would need to be able to “justify” her request to the PHA administrators. We were turned away abruptly when we reached the PHA office and informed that both Ms. Coleman and Mr. Allen were unavailable.

In the car ride back to her SIL apartment, we jointly constructed a negotiation strategy for the next day. I was leaving town and would be unable to accompany Nyisha. Yet I supported her with a plan for approaching the PHA administrators alone. Acting on her own, Nyisha succeeded in getting her housing assignment changed.

The Entitlement Narrative: Continued

When I visited Nyisha at her new PHA house, she narrated the sequence of events that enabled her to get her housing assignment changed from the high-rise to a stand-alone home. After Nyisha introduced me to Jackie, her brother’s girlfriend, and Malcolm’s cousins, she escorted me upstairs where I greeted her mother and Malcolm. We then settled in Nyisha’s bedroom. During her narration, Nyisha got very excited and her voice became louder and higher pitched as she energetically narrated the events. Furthermore, her facial expressions tended to be bold and exaggerated, which added vigor to her story. Nyisha mentioned her newly assigned case manager, Rebecca, from whom she sought assistance, as I was unable to accompany her. These excerpts are paraphrased from my field notes, as I did not tape record:

I went down there to the PHA office really early. Oh no, first I was waiting [at the SIL apartment] for my case manger, Rebecca, and she stood me up. I didn’t get down there until late because I had to take the bus. When I looked in, there was a room full of people. So I went outside to use the pay phone and I called Mr. Allen for an appointment; he set it up for 11:30. So I just waited in there. Rebecca finally showed up. (Nyisha mentions Rebecca using a very negative tone of voice). Rebecca kept saying they probably wouldn’t change the site but maybe they would put me on a list for an early transfer. Rebecca was being really negative and she didn’t even know what she was talking about. I was thinking well it doesn’t hurt to ask. She made me feel really scared but I kept remembering Lauren saying, “You can do it!” (Nyisha changes her voice to imitate mine and I laugh at her rendition of me.)

I had provided Nyisha with the phone numbers for both Mr. Allen and Ms. Coleman before leaving town, and she resourcefully adjusted the plan we had set when she was forced to arrive late because of her case manager’s negligence.¹² Given the conflict-ridden cultural scripts that commonly guide interactions between officials and clients, Nyisha’s apprehension was normative. Furthermore, she had a lot at stake in the outcome of the negotiation. Nyisha’s apprehension was also fueled by what she describes as her case manager’s negativity. However, our previous experiences as a duo and, in particular, reflections about our interactions with PHA officials apparently enabled Nyisha to internalize a narrative of entitlement. She incorporated lessons learned into her own strategic approach. Nyisha had internalized my encouragement and she drew emotionally and cognitively on this supportive narrative to offset her apprehension. She embodied through her actions not only entitlement to

acknowledgment but also an understanding that the PHA organization is not unbending in actuality. Nyisha demonstrated both persistence and flexibility in adapting her plan and in pushing for extra consideration from the housing administrators. Across my case studies, I found persistence to be key to successful negotiation strategies and essential in working through and beyond bureaucratic protocols.

Victimization Narrative: Performing “the Other” Identity

Nyisha continued to describe and enact the meeting with Mr. Allen:

When Mr. Allen called me back, Rebecca wasn't even there; she had left to go get a sandwich. I went in there and told him I didn't feel comfortable at the PHA high-rise. He was sitting back and looking at me with an attitude, like “OK and what do you want me to do?” He said, “Well there's nothing I can do.” Then, I got all nervous looking and I even started rubbing my jeans with my hands (Nyisha imitates this rubbing motion for us). I said, “Well, ever since I was raped I don't feel comfortable around a bunch of black guys.” (Nyisha paused, looked out at us, and started laughing loudly. I glanced at the others' expressions in the room and they were smiling at her dramatic performance, even Nyisha's mother.) He got all uncomfortable and started looking at his computer to find another house for me. I was like, “Thank you, I was just scared that I would get killed or raped having to go in there.” He was thinking like, “Oh, don't say that word again, black girl.” But then Rebecca walked in and her sandwich was already half gone. Rebecca asked what was going on and I motioned he was finding me something. He then announced there was a scattered site house but that he had never seen it so he didn't know what it was like. I said, well it had to be better than the high-rise site so I will take it.

Nyisha reflected on the prior negotiations between Mr. Allen and herself in the privacy of her home and she presented herself as strategic, astute, and powerful. Nyisha characterized both Mr. Allen, the nervous white guy, and Rebecca, the ineffectual sandwich eater, as dupes and herself as the victor. This scenario demonstrates how clients as well as administrators may actively draw on alternative narratives to strategically strengthen their positions. Nyisha strategically used the border zone between Mr. Allen and herself as a way to position her request so that it would be considered. At first, the administrator addressed Nyisha with the same “attitude” or curt manner that was typical across interactions between officials and clients. Nyisha and Mr. Allen began their interaction following divergent guiding narratives: Nyisha wanted her housing assignment changed and Mr. Allen, who held the power, was not amenable to altering Nyisha's assignment. Mr. Allen viewed Nyisha through the cultural model of the dependent, black welfare mother. Young women in Nyisha's position did not have the right to simply assert preference for an alternative residence. In particular, public service systems do not enable recipients to assert choice regarding how their needs are met. As explained by Rose (1999), recipients are not considered to be full citizens, so they are not given the privilege to be discerning. They are rendered as marginal and reliant on the generosity of taxpayers.

Rather, Nyisha was compelled to play the part of a vulnerable victim, highlighting her misfortunes as a way to trigger the administrator to act. After Nyisha performed a stigmatized black, female victim, but in this case a worthy victim identity, Mr. Allen quickly accommodated her request. Nyisha simultaneously triggered Mr. Allen's cultural models of dangerous black guys and victimized black girls through her performance. She turned an authentic traumatic past experience into a performance of racialized spectacle (Farley 2002), "Othering" herself and the black guys into objects for Mr. Allen's consumption. Nyisha's trauma story and her emphasis on race elicit Mr. Allen's discomfort (at least this is Nyisha's perception). This performance pushes the administrator out of his colorblind, privileged stance (Farley 2002; Valdes et al. 2002). Through Nyisha's identity work, she at once turns her trauma into spectacle and also brings attention to the race and gender distinctions between Mr. Allen and herself. Her performance is enacted within a risk management framework that pushes the white administrator into action.

While I was not present and did not have the opportunity to speak to Mr. Allen directly, his behavioral shift makes sense in the context of my broader fieldwork. During the negotiations that I did observe, decision making and actions by public officials tended to reflect a risk management approach. Once an agency becomes culpable for a client's welfare, identity politics shift. For example, Nyisha asserted her agency as she cleverly reminded Mr. Allen that he is responsible for her safety. Nyisha had received her "gold" paperwork, in which the PHA agreed to provide her with housing. After culpability is established, public officials risk losing professional status and their jobs if they do not meet the safety expectations of policymakers above them in the bureaucracy. Officials tend to respond to client requests if a client's situation could potentially put an official or agency at risk for public humiliation or public accountability. If Nyisha is "raped" or "killed" at a PHA site, the administrator and his agency could be considered responsible.

Perhaps because of embarrassment and an effort to avoid discussing Nyisha's trauma, possibly because of a sense of compassion, or perhaps most likely, because of fear of potential liability, Mr. Allen quickly changed Nyisha's housing assignment. Mr. Allen may have experienced a combination of these motives. Nyisha was able to use to her own advantage the gendered and racial tensions between them, as well as the general culture of fear that dominates social service systems. SIL caseworkers and administrators with whom I spoke expressed apprehension about being blamed for trauma sustained by clients. These same officials shared with me their feelings of powerlessness as they lamented an inability to stem the ongoing oppression and dangerous circumstances that affected many clients' lives.

The scenario with Mr. Allen complicates understanding the role of the border zone in shaping identity negotiations. In the first scenario with Ms. Coleman, the border was crossed as we moved into a more intimate private space. In the private zone, Ms. Coleman and Nyisha began to share a common storyline and they were able to communicate a fuller spectrum of their identities with one another. In the scenario with Ms. Coleman, the immediate spatial context played a significant role in shifting identity negotiations. A sense

of intimacy was accessible for Nyisha and Ms. Coleman because they shared common race and gender identities. Also, they were both mothers of young African American boys. Collective histories of oppression create a platform and common context for unification and intimacy, despite ongoing lived inequalities within racially similar groups (MacKinnon 2002).

Mr. Allen and Nyisha also interacted in a private office, yet border crossing did not occur across both dimensions (storyline and identity) as it had with Ms. Coleman. Even as Nyisha's performance brought Mr. Allen into concurrence with her storyline (he granted her a new housing assignment), identity stereotypes and cultural models were highlighted and rigidified in the process. In the scenario with Mr. Allen, the sociohistorical discursive context (i.e., stigmatized cultural models) played a more significant role than the immediate physical context in shaping identity negotiations. Critical race theory explains mechanisms of intersectionality, in which oppressions along multiple dimensions including race, gender, class, sexuality, and age interact in complicated and mutually reinforcing ways (Valdes et al. 2002). According to Nyisha, she did not connect with Mr. Allen (even within a private space). The identity border between Mr. Allen and Nyisha is more difficult to cross because of ongoing institutional inequities and dissimilarity across multiple identity dimensions of race, class, gender, and age.¹³

As mentioned earlier, clients are forced to justify requests for services and this entails the need to perform system-sanctioned identities. The victim trope is a dominant one within public service systems. There is more willingness to help someone whose difficulties are not caused by their own actions—those who are the victims of others or of circumstances. Nyisha deliberately disguised her feelings of vulnerability as she played the victim role and enacted a common script. In her narration of the events, Nyisha transformed and objectified the suffering experienced from an actual rape into a performance and a spectacle. The performance enabled her vulnerabilities to remain hidden and protected. Therefore, the tenable fear surrounding her trauma that was evident to me the day we drove away from the PHA high-rise was absent from her sketch and performance. Even the audience members in her bedroom did not convey any sign of compassion regarding the actual trauma; rather, they smiled at Nyisha's dramatic skit.

Nyisha's identity work is suggestive of DuBois's concept of "double consciousness." Du Bois (1903) explains the ways in which blacks at once view themselves as objects through the lens of the white observer and as agents through their own self-determined lens (Akom 2008). Nyisha could see herself through Mr. Allen's lens as the black victim, while at the same time she perceived her own astute ability to influence his actions. Du Bois and contemporary critical race scholars emphasize the linguistic, behavioral, and psychological skills (i.e., those clearly evidenced by Nyisha) needed to accomplish identity work in a racially discriminatory society (Akom 2008; Blau and Brown 2001).

Conclusion

Nyisha is positioned in such a way that she must divulge personal and private circumstances from her life to a relative stranger to justify her request for safe housing. It is essential that “we should not forget that [resources are] won on a stage on which the roles have been largely sculpted from above and on which the usual performances, no matter how artful must reinforce the appearances approved by the dominant” (Scott 1990:35). Clearly, Nyisha demonstrated personal agency and resourcefulness even as she performed a dominant victim trope. Yet it is a social justice concern, that policy makers and providers acknowledge the disservice done to clients, such as Nyisha, when they are pushed to mold and “use” personal trauma to justify access to basic necessities.

Nyisha, Malcolm, and I were active agents on the path to this young family’s access to public housing. This movement was fraught with uncertainty and unpredictability, as we struggled with bureaucratic structures, applying our knowledge of how to “work the system.” We pushed against rigid procedure protocols, as well as discursive (i.e., identity stereotypes) and spatial confinement. Our ongoing process of negotiation points to material barriers and limited cultural narratives that restrict clients’ access to publicly provided services. I want to emphasize that these restrictions are the norm and the barriers are not easily transgressed. It took perseverance, the learning and practice of an entitlement narrative, my availability as an advocate, good luck, and a number of unusual circumstances to overcome the barriers.

This case analysis advances theory in psychological anthropology. It expands understanding of cultural border zones to include more specific attention to the structural and spatial barriers that inform identity storylines. My research draws on Goodwin and Duranti’s (1992) multidimensional analysis of context. Context always matters in framing the identity negotiations of social actors. Yet, this case analysis shows when and why particular structural, discursive, and spatial aspects of context become more salient in influencing identity negotiations. A shifting physical setting was key to altering the identity negotiations with Ms. Coleman. However, while context was still essential in shaping the identity interactions with Mr. Allen, this study shows that a different dimension, the discursive zone (i.e., cultural models), was in this instance more influential than physical setting.

The case also shows the relevance of individual agents’ self-efficacy within a web of social positioning. All of us, including Nyisha, Ms. Coleman, Mr. Allen, myself, and even Malcolm effected the course of events described here; yet our positioning within broader race, gender, class, and age structures effected our relative identity performances and interactions.

Spaces of intimacy arose between Nyisha and myself, as we deliberately formed negotiation strategies and as I communicated to her my appraisal of her resiliency, worth, and assertiveness. Another space of intimacy arose in the private office interaction with Ms. Coleman, as each of us connected across the border zone and constructed a joint affirming storyline. A risk management model and intersecting inequalities along the lines of race, class, gender, and age created a more complex context for Nyisha to negotiate in her interactions with

Mr. Allen. Identity borders were rigidified in the process. Stereotypical cultural models, cumbersome protocols, and bureaucratic barriers restrict identity storylines between officials and clients. When open spaces are co-created, storylines reflect greater flexibility and ultimately result in greater access for young families to material benefits.

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Notes

1. All individual and agency names have been changed to protect confidentiality.
2. This statistic is provided by an SIL administrator.
3. All case study participants provided written informed consent regarding their participation in the research.
4. All but one of the interviews were conducted in the mothers' SIL apartments. The remaining interview was conducted in a semiprivate space at the SIL administrative office.
5. The local child welfare system implements a policy of extensions that enable youth to remain in the care of the child welfare system after turning age 18 and up until their 21st birthdays. Extensions are granted based on recommendations from SIL case managers, child welfare workers, probation officers, and, ultimately, judges.
6. This circumstance reflects a broader trend of high staff turnover in the SIL program and the child welfare system.
7. Clients transitioning from the SIL program receive priority from the PHA, as they are assigned housing directly and do not have to wait. However, because Nyisha was denied housing, she was not eligible for this special program.
8. In the rest of the article, all quotes are recreated from field notes and represent approximations of dialogue, not the exact uttered words.
9. Nyisha was able to stay in her SIL residency a few days after her birthday, until her PHA residency became available.
10. My decision was based on awareness that clients were not considered entitled to preferences in regard to public provisions.
11. Nyisha was referring to the experience I mentioned earlier of being raped.
12. Nyisha and I had planned that she would arrive early before the office opened so that she could be first to submit her request.
13. I do not mean to suggest here that shared intimacy between Nyisha and Mr. Allen is impossible, but, rather, that it would take sustained interactions over time to break out of "familiar stranger" (Mattingly 2008) molds.

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