

“Eyes on Me Regardless”: Youth Responses to High School Surveillance

By Jen Weiss

In public schools across the country, students are encountering the effects of a variety of security measures designed to make schools safer. Students enter and exit their schools through metal detectors, scanning machines, and under the suspicious stares and booming shouts of security officials and police officers. On their way to classes, they move through hallways, stairwells, and sometimes classrooms mounted with surveillance cameras. From California to Florida, Washington to Maine, urban and suburban public school officials and government policymakers are choosing to respond to issues related to student violence and school safety by deploying an array of surveilling techniques and technologies.

New York City, home of more surveillance cameras per square foot than any other city in the country, leads the pack in developing and implementing school-based surveillance initiatives (Ruck et al., 2005; Boal, 1998). In 2004, City Council passed a bill to install surveillance cameras and metal detectors in every public school by 2006 and allocated \$120 million in the five year capital budget for new security cameras which cost

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approximately \$75,000 per school to install (Bennett, 2004). In fact, the City’s Impact schools and nine other large high schools, with large African-American and Latino populations, were top priority to receive cameras, metal detectors, and heavy police presence. Ostensibly designed to improve school safety, the effects of the technologies and personnel required to implement surveillance are manifold—many of which are counterproductive to safety, and, in some cases, actually foment violence. Instead of a greater sense of safety in and around school, along with an active and civically-minded sense of school community, students describe a feeling of danger and disillusion.

More and more, public schools are becoming part of the network of post-9/11, state-sponsored surveillance—spaces in which students experience firsthand what it is to be monitored, feared, contained, and harassed all in the name of safety and protection. Even after security measures are installed, students refer to an increase in the number of violent incidents inside their schools, and attest to the harassment they experience at the hands of police and school safety agents (SSA)¹ now located inside their schools.² As one student put it: “If you would walk outside when the late bell rings, you would hear [the security staff yelling] ‘Get out. Go home. Go home’ ... They do not want us there. And even when we’re inside the building, they do not want us there. So it’s a constant ‘I don’t want you here’ type thing.”

These stories match up with current research noting that low-income youth of color are being pushed out of public spaces and are increasingly monitored by authority and placed under the threat of criminalization (see Fine et al., 2003; Ruck et al., 2005). Correspondent with research that contends that with greater police presence comes an elevation in arrests and incarceration rates for youth of color, especially African-Americans (Poe-Yagamata & Jones, 2000), the students with whom I worked are equally aware of heightened scrutiny in their school, as well as in surrounding neighborhoods and around their homes.

These studies illuminate some of what gets forgotten in the search for greater school security and fewer incidents of school violence: that school-wide surveillance policies also produce indirect and counterproductive consequences on urban students, especially but not only those already marginalized by the school system. The very presence of urban youth, educational theorist Henry Giroux argues, prompts in the public imagination a “rhetoric of fear, control, and surveillance” (2003, p. 554). Loic Wacquant refers to this level of scrutiny as the phenomenon of “social panopticism” in which social service bureaucracies, like schools and other institutions, are called on to use the information and human means they possess to exercise close surveillance on ‘problem populations’ (2001, p. 84).

Failing to address the larger economic, political, and social conditions faced by poor and working-class youth of color, urban school policies and reform agendas are generated in a context of heightened fear and moral panic. Poor urban high schools have largely become, or are becoming, sites of containment and control. They are spaces where school policies which involve surveillance technologies and techniques get tested on youth bodies already framed by suspicion (Ruck

et al., 2005; Saltman & Gabbard, 2003; Garland, 2001; Males, 1996; Noguera 1995).

Neoliberalism, or the retreat of social welfare programs matched by an increase of social control polices, is helping to foment a climate of fear and surveillance. Michelle Fine (2006) argues that privatization and what she names the “privileged public sphere” is not only a re-alignment of public dollars, but also public bodies. In this sense, surveillance and security policies in schools are strategies for moving these public bodies around; not only to and from classrooms, but also from school to prison. Surveillance trends in schools are not merely more cops and more cameras, but are also symptoms that emerge in the context of neoliberalism—represented by a range of educational reform agendas and policies. Expecting surveillance and security measure to address the consequences of excessive over-crowding, financial inequity, and lack of educational services such as counseling and peer mediation signals an unwillingness to deal with underlying macroeconomic issues faced by schools and educators.

In the context of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), we witness the retreat of public funding and a demand for state or federal (and private) control and accountability. Although it gave students in failing schools a chance to enroll in successful district schools and required schools and districts to be held responsible for its under-prepared students and teachers, it failed to allocate resources and funding to meet these needs and held them accountable for outcomes they were ill-prepared to meet. It is a good example of an accountability system that is punitive—forcing schools and educators to impose NCLB’s standards without compromise or questions. Such an accountability system fails to address the myriad structural factors that contribute to struggling schools. Ultimately, the law serves to penalize schools and educators—measuring compliance solely by the increase in standardized test scores of its students. Despite an important intent, NCLB has done little to close the ‘achievement’ gap of Black and Latino students—with only 38% of New York City’s public high school students graduating in four years. At the same time, NCLB represents a financial windfall for standardized testing and textbook companies and has awarded millions of dollars to security companies. Homeland security-related business is said to be the economy’s “fastest-growing sector—jumping from \$28 billion in 2003 to a projected \$170 billion by 2015” (Homeland Security Research Corporation, 2005 as quoted by Editors, 2005).

Students learn to avoid security at all costs; and they learn that the rules they are expected to follow are not consistently imposed. Interactions with security become moments in which students note the failure of surveillance—on some days they’ll “get caught for going to the bathroom without a hall pass” and on other days they do not. Following the school’s rules, then, means being subjected to ‘the presence of an absence’ of authority and experience the material and psychological impact of these policy trends. What they are responding to, my research contends, is not merely the violence of feeling so heavily watched, but the violence that accompanies unjust school policies directed at low-income, urban youth of color students

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in these schools, student who are deeply aware that the persistent advancement of surveillance measures inside their schools has ill-intended consequences on them and their education.

Given the context urban youth find themselves in—appropriately described by one student as “eyes on me regardless”³—what then becomes of student resistance to the oppressive and often punitive conditions they face inside their schools? Although my larger study addresses the political economy informing school-based surveillance policies for youth of color in urban areas, my central research focus has been to trace student resistance to these policies. Students narrate stories of fear and frustration. But they also narrate stories of resistance. Foucault (1980) reminds us that where the forces of domination reside, so too do the forces of resistance. In school spaces there is a multitude of both; however when power masquerades or is concealed through mechanisms of surveillance, it re-defines what “counts” as resistance. Theorists generally disagree about what constitutes resistance: some argue that it must be collective struggle with specific goals and intentions (Hermans, 2001; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985); others note that while efforts at resistance are always active under domination, they are harder to detect and may appear complicitous with power (Kelley, 1990; Scott, 1985). Ashforth and Mael (1998) outline a basic framework for understanding the overlapping nature of the concept. They argue that resistance may be directed at a threat or that it may be indirectly targeted at a threat (diffuse); that it may be collective or individual; that it may be authorized by an institution, or remain unauthorized; and, finally, that it may be facilitative of an institution’s goals or oppositional to them.

Keeping this basic framework in mind as a guide, this article does not take up what constitutes resistance, but rather what we might learn about resistance and surveillance by looking at how students at a Bronx, New York, high school have responded to security initiatives recently imposed on them. It discusses three responses: the protest; tactical avoidance; and what I am calling emergent participation. I will address each of these strategies in depth and follow with a brief consideration of what they teach us about resistance. Taken together, these responses offer us a chance to consider the multiple forms that resistance takes and those that emerge over time, in this case, over the course of a school year. I will begin by considering what is perhaps the most promising and definitely the most visible response to school-wide surveillance measures: a student-organized walkout of 1,500 students that took place at a large comprehensive high school in the Bronx, New York, in late September 2005. But before attending to the protest, I will give a brief history of New York City school security policy.

Situating Surveillance in Terms of the New York City School System

Being the largest school system in the country, New York City schools see their share of violent incidences.⁴ In 1992, during David Dinkins’ tenure as mayor, two teenagers were shot to death at point-blank range in the hallway of a Brooklyn high

school. Since then, high crime schools have been the focus of intensive security and safety initiatives. That same year, the teacher's union counted 129 gun incidents—a jump from forty five the previous year (1990-1991). In early 1992 the school board installed weapons-scanning metal detector systems in the forty-one high schools with the highest number of violent incidents. For students in high schools that were deemed high-crime—schools that researcher John Devine (1996) characterizes as “lower-tier” high schools—entering school required that students enter through side entrances, wait to meet security guards or safety security officers (SSO), and pass through identity card machines, metal detectors and backpack scanners. Often this would delay students being on time for first period.

Mayor Giuliani's tenure as mayor, 1994-2002, became synonymous with the “broken windows” theory of crime prevention which states that if minor offenses are not addressed, they will lead to more serious crime. By 1994, the number of high schools with metal detectors had jumped to forty-seven. Also in 1994, the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 and other ‘zero tolerance’ policies were being passed at the federal and state level (Giroux, 2003). ‘Zero tolerance’ policies accord mandatory sentencing and “three strikes and you're out” responses to every infraction, from the minor to the major. In 1998, the mayor handed over the school security guard contract to the New York Police Department (NYPD). New security recruits were to be trained at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and would report directly to the NYPD, not to school authorities (see also NYCLU, 2007).

Applying “broken windows” theory as an approach to school safety is excessively problematic. For one, “broken windows” refuses to address root causes and instead takes aim at the appearance of problems. It holds that any sign of ‘visible disorder’ must be addressed or it will lead to more serious crime. Schools with populations over 3,000 regularly appear disordered. Coupled with our culture's fear of urban youth, urban schools where youth congregate in large numbers can and do represent ‘visible disorder’ for authority. Instead of addressing over-crowding—the issue that students, teachers, and principals generally cite as the cause of school violence—a “broken windows” approach targets non-criminal behaviors as if they were criminal (for a lengthier discussion of this, see Nolan, 2007).⁵

In 2004 Mayor Bloomberg, who placed the NYC public schools under mayoral control, introduced the Impact Schools initiative—a joint effort by the New York Police Department and the Department of Education. Together, the departments isolated the 22 middle and high schools with “higher than average number of criminal incidents, transfers of students due to safety violations, and what the Department of Education terms ‘early warning problems’ such as low school attendance and disorderly behavior” (Drum Major Institute, 2005, p. 2). These schools, according to the mayor's office, account for 13 percent of all the crime in the system. As such, they receive the bulk of security initiatives and dollars. The NYPD's “school safety task force” includes 200 uniformed officers (dedicated solely to Impact Schools) and augmented scanning and security measures. In 2004, it received \$6.25 million from the U.S. Department of Justice to implement these measures. The results are

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mixed: in January 2005, the city claimed that major crime was down 43 percent in a subset of the 16 high schools where the program had been implemented. Other schools, however, experienced an increase in crime while in the program. The National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University (NCSC) found however that the DOE’s numbers reporting a decline at Impact schools were not statistically significant compared to the decline in crime figures in other high schools (Phenix, 2006). The Mayor’s 2007 Management Report pointed to a 21% jump in major and minor school crime in 2006 as compared to 2005, revealing that cameras and other surveillance systems in schools are not doing the job they were intended to do, and quite possible altering school environments in such a way that they are no longer conducive to learning.

What this history and these initiatives currently amount to in terms of surveillance in New York City schools is a range of security technologies: digital or analog video cameras; metal detectors, scanning wands, ID cards, Internet tracking, biometric fingerprinting and face recognition systems, transparent lockers and book bags, electronic gates, two-way radios. These technologies exist to various degrees (and for various purposes and with varying results) in top-tier, middle-tier, and lower-tier high schools. As of 2004, of the 1,300 city schools in New York City, only 155 had security cameras. That year, city council officials passed a bill to install surveillance cameras and metal detectors in *every* public school by 2006. The current number of schools with video cameras has yet to be reported; and no evidence exists to suggest that video surveillance is preventative of school crimes (Monahan, 2007).⁶

State senator Bill Perkins is critical of video surveillance in schools because of its racial dimension. He was quoted in *City Limits Weekly* stating that “there is a racist tinge to this as far as I’m concerned—the vast majority of kids they are surveilling in this way are children of color and low income. We, as democracy and a city especially, step across the line only when it comes to certain elements of our constituency” (Winston, 2007). In fact, the City’s Impact Schools and nine other large high schools, with large African-American and Latino populations, were top priority to receive cameras, along with metal detectors and heavy police presence.

Methodology

This article is drawn from qualitative data collected as part of a larger research study which involves 20 youth participants—an admixture of boys and girls of color (predominantly Latino and African-American) between the ages of 15 and 23, from New York City. Half of them come from an after-school poetry organization, Urban Word NYC⁷; the other half come from a large comprehensive High School in the Bronx which will remain unnamed. The research design consisted of close observation in and between both sites; one-on-one interviews with all of them and focus groups with some of them; and some shadowing. The high school featured in this article is populated by close to 5,000 low-income youth of color

from its surrounding areas. It is a large, old, over-crowded urban New York City high school located in the Northwest Bronx. Students are tracked upon entrance into the school; one of the school's specialized programs has a strong reputation even among top-tier public high schools. In addition to all being what I am calling middle-range students,⁸ perhaps the most telling feature that connects all these students is that they are all self-identified writers or rappers. Those from the high school have helped co-found the school's first hip hop poetry club (*Spoken Ink*)—a turn of events I will address at the conclusion of this article.

Student Perceptions of Everyday Surveillance

In his book *Maximum Security* (1996), educational researcher and ethnographer John Devine chronicles how student violence in New York City's public school system has become normalized. Devine suggests that youth violence increases as school personnel (administrators, teachers, security) relinquish responsibility for reprimanding and controlling students. He argues that schools have become sites which ignore student violence altogether or evade it by unleashing a regime of technological surveillance devices such as metal detectors and scanning machines. Their cumulative effect is to distance school personnel from student bodies. Devine contends that because behavioral rules are never enforced by teachers and administrators, the school systems' rules produce a phenomenon he refers to as the "marshmallow effect"—"where students pushed a rule, the system, like a marshmallow, gave way" (p. 109). My research suggests that we must complicate this dynamic in order to understand the effects of surveillance today.

Furthermore, Pedro Noguera (1995) has argued that commonly practiced safety measures, such as the use of surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and security officials, tend to perpetuate instead of reduce violence. My research looks closely at these 'safety measures' and asks students what and how they think about them. Ten years after Noguera and Devine's work, my research suggests that it is the combination of sophisticated surveillance technologies and a range of security personnel with differing levels of authority that help to ensure that the "system" performs less like a marshmallow and more like an intractable, yet ineffectual police state. It is apparent that a new playground of rules and resistances is operating in public schools today.

The youth I interviewed and observed are keenly aware of what surveillance entails. They believe it can protect them in certain circumstances. But in other contexts, that it creeps in and takes something. It unsettles and prods. It observes on the one hand, and profiles on the other. Whereas one kind of watching feels protective; another feels punitive. Exploring the various locations and ways in which they feel watched, youth participants rarely had trouble distinguishing one from the other, as Rafael, a student, clearly articulates:

Surveilling is watching like stalking almost. Like if I was to observe you, I would observe you only for this moment. Surveillance is constant, often. Like if they was to observe me, they would observe the hair; or how my nose is always runny, or

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something like that. But if they was to be surveilling, they'd find out my habits. I like drawing. I write with a graffiti handstyle or I take the train home. stuff that they're not supposed to know out of observation.

When asked to describe how they think school security officials perceived them, the youth participants listed the following adjectives: *up to no good, hoodlums, felonists, delinquents, loud trouble-makers, criminals, deviants, either selling drugs or wanna-be future rappers, wearing baggy jeans and hoodies, or short skirts if you're a girl.* As David, an African-American male student, put it: “if you look like a description, if you look suspicious, you’ll be confronted most of the time.” In this regard, the sentiment “eyes on me regardless” keenly expresses the double-bind that middle-range students find themselves in at school. On one hand they are being watched by security officers and other authority figures; and on the other hand, they are watched from all sides by their peers—asked to project an outward posture or pose depending on where they come from and who they associate with (Dance, 2002).

At this juncture, I will turn to the students’ initial response to the installation of metal detectors in their school. Dramatic in its significance, this event also helped to set the stage for other kinds of responses to surveillance.

Protest: The Walkout

The walkout, reported widely on local and national news, clearly represents a breakdown in school policy and student compliance and is the place from which to begin thinking about how urban teenagers are contending with and also responding to school surveillance policy. The walkout is an exceptional example of a student-driven collective call to action that serves as a telling reminder that “youth as collective community actors” are indeed “capable of responding to coercive policies” (Ginwright et al., 2005, pp. 32-33).

The walkout occurred in a complex context. Unlike many neighboring schools, the Bronx high school (at which both my research and the walkout took place) and its administration had resisted the installation of metal detectors. Students and teachers suggest that the principal forestalled these changes for as long as she could before acquiescing to the demands of the DOE in Fall 2005. Although some whispers of impending metal detectors had circulated the previous spring, little if any formal warning was given to students until they were gathered in an auditorium at the beginning of the new school year. There, students learned that due to increased violence (an incident that happened outside the school, near the subway in which a student from another high school was killed by someone who did not attend the high school in question),⁹ metal detectors would be installed. This would mean that a number of items including cell phones and MP3 devices would be confiscated upon entrance and that students would lose their open campus lunch privileges. Within days, a student-organized walkout was mounted.

Spontaneously conceived of and organized by a small group of frustrated students on a youth website (Sconex.com) and unofficially supported by one local community-

based organization,¹⁰ the walkout of 1,500 Bronx high school students was fueled by anger and disbelief at their school's apparently draconian measures to curb violence at the start of their school year. The root of student hostility stemmed from newfound surveillance measures: the installment of metal detectors, an increase of NYPD and School Safety Agents (SSA) on school premises, and a 'captive lunchroom' program which prohibited students from leaving campus for lunch. In the course of my research, I spoke with several of the students who left the building and marched three miles under police escort and called a meeting with their region's superintendent and other Department of Education officials demanding that "metal detectors and security cameras be removed, that they be allowed to have lunch outside the school, and that an earlier ban on cell phones be lifted" (Santos, 2005). I also spoke with students who decided to remain inside the building for fear of getting in trouble with parents and teachers. Inside the walls of the school, after conducting interviews with students and teachers, the walkout's symbolic resonance, not its outcomes (or lack of outcomes) stood out as most significant.

In an extensive historical and cultural study, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James C. Scott (1990) examines the fluctuations of cultural and political domination and resistance by studying how power relationships are inscribed and challenged through social transcripts. He labels as "public" transcripts those used by those in power to support the established social order. "Hidden" transcripts are discursive critiques, offstage rituals, and resistant activities taken by those in positions of subordination. Scott analyzes seeming patterns of compliance and submission that emerge when surveillance is overt. Resistance, for Scott, originates "not simply from material appropriation but from the pattern of personal humiliations that characterize that exploitation" (p. 112).

Scott argues that "the greater the power exercised over [subordinate populations] and the closer the surveillance, the more incentive subordinates have to foster the impression of compliance, agreement, and deference" (p. 89). When students protested the implementation of metal detectors at the entrance of their school, however, they were anything but compliant. Or so it initially seemed. Perhaps this was because the decision to install metal detectors had not been explained to staff or students. "There was no rationale behind the plan," said one of the school's English teachers. Instead, the plan-from-above appeared hasty, without warrant, and ad hoc. In fact, in most accounts by staff and students, the surveillance strategy at the high school was ill-planned from the start, and exposed holes in the Department of Education's security policies. And although school security attempted to prevent students from leaving the building before 3rd period on the day of the walkout, they were outnumbered.

The student-organized walkout agitated policymakers and school officials (warranting phone calls home to the parents of every student who walked out) and made the headlines in the local and national news. While it did not remove the metal detectors (it actually increased them), students like Esteban suggest that the walkout's greatest achievement was that it "did create awareness." Though they were disappointed that the protest didn't achieve its aim and that it was not followed up

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by another protest,¹¹ student upon student agreed that the walkout “showed to a lot of officials that youth do have a voice.” Fernando Carlo, an organizer from *Sistas and Brothas United* believes that the protest forced adults to take youth more seriously. He explains,

Now all these people see that students understand what's going on; they understand that they [students] do feel uncomfortable—they realize the metal detectors don't help and they create all these other problems and the students know and I think the number one excuse for why students aren't involved in this kind of decision-making is because 'oh, students don't know.' Well, the students are smart enough to realize the metal detectors aren't helping; they're smart enough to get all these other students together and walk off to the region office and get a meeting, so I definitely think it [the walkout] made people jump up on their toes and realize that students know.

And finally, according to one student, the walkout reminded both students and teachers that students have the right to peacefully assemble “against things that we dislike, so we took that into consideration,” Rafael reminds us.

In sum, the walkout was noteworthy and dramatic because it evidenced a clear breakdown in the system that those at all levels of authority inside the Department of Education could not ignore. It was, in Ashforth and Mael's framework, an oppositional form of resistance; an obvious challenge to authority. On their own, student organizers built a protest which included 1,500 of their peers—all of them responding, ostensibly, to what they perceived as injustice and disrespect. In this sense, the protest was collective. Every student I spoke with testified to detesting what the metal detectors and security officers represented in their school: that they and their peers were all potential criminals. Although it was collective, the protest was not necessarily unified. In discussions with students following the walkout, many of them spoke of the fact that a lot of kids walked out for the fun of it; that they were not really invested in getting rid of the metal detectors and were unwilling to stay with the struggle.

To the student organizers, the ones most likely to do the work of mounting a follow-up protest, this irked. Their perceptions of their fellow peers' motives (or lack of them) no doubt influenced their decision not to continue the struggle to overturn the surveillance and security measures in their school. The distinction between collective and/or unified resistance is an important one given the current context of school-wide surveillance. Although collective resistance may be what foments a campaign to overturn one condition or another inside a school (the presence of 1,500 youth on the streets is enough to generate a lot of noise), it is difficult to sustain collective campaigns in part, I argue, because the conditions of surveillance produce distrust, especially among subordinate players. And finally, the walkout was also conspicuous, which meant that school officials and policymakers could anticipate, study, and potentially defeat the plans for a follow-up protest.

When *Sistas and Brothas United* attempted to organize a three-school protest at the old Armory building on Kingsbridge in the Bronx, they could not attain a permit from the City. Organizer Carlo suggested that after the September walkout,

DOE officials were doing everything in their power to prevent grassroots organizers from mounting other protests against metal detectors. This left organizers to pursue other, less directly oppositional avenues of resistance.

The protest evidenced a desire among students to respond to the unfair changes they were encountering in their school. But it was not until I interviewed the students themselves—some of whom helped organize the walkout, others who actively participated in it, and still others who stayed in class for fear of being penalized—that two other important and surprising responses began to emerge. These responses in progressive order are *tactical avoidance* and *emergent participation*. These lesser known and less obvious attempts by students to respond *tactically* to school practices of surveillance may yield deeper and more promising implications for understanding the consequences of school-based surveillance.

Tactical Avoidance

Of the many reasons students willingly risked being penalized for resisting the installation of metal detectors and security in their school, certainly the most compelling to emerge in my conversations with youth is the fact of how scary it is to enter school each day under the gaze of suspicion. New York City teenagers do not typically trust “the cops.” And as far as they could tell, cops were now in their school. While they may have grown accustomed to this kind of treatment in stores or on street corners, navigating school with the same kind of guardedness was something students resisted from the outset. Across interviews and focus groups, the students I spoke with frequently associated security inside the school building with interactions with law enforcement on subways, in malls, and on their blocks. The conflation is significant, for it makes clear the failure of urban schools to differentiate themselves from the culture of the streets and surrounding neighborhoods.

David, 17, said of how he approaches a store, “if they’re looking suspicious at me, I just avoid it altogether. I just don’t go in.” In many regards, students are approaching the doorways of school with the same tactical response. Although NYC’s Department of Education insists that the presence of school security officers makes school safer, without fail, and in part due to their proximity to all forms of police harassment and profiling in neighborhoods, on subways, in stores, and elsewhere, urban youth equate the presence of security officials with harassment. Comparing his experience of passing through metal detectors at school with how he enters a store, one student told of how he makes sure to lift his baseball cap, make eye contact with security so as to assure them that he is there only to shop. Suspicion, in other words, is a condition that follows urban youth; school is no exception.

The tragedies of Columbine and September 11th have forced public schools to step up surveillance practices—producing an environment with less freedom and more control. “What the ‘War on Terror’ and its associative social control measures illustrates is the willingness on the part of those charged with securing

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the nation to resort to any means necessary in accomplishing that task. The goal is security; the reality is one of control” (Lindsay, 2004, 323). Students insist that the combination of personnel (several layers of security officials) *and* technology (scanners and metal detectors) at the entrance, exits, and in the hallways are what makes school an often humiliating experience. Months after the walkout, in the course of my interviews, the rage students expressed as participants in the walkout had for some slipped quietly into acquiescence. Junior students lamented the fact that they had such high hopes for their senior year; now all they cared about was “getting out of here.”

Senior students stated that they acquiesced to the harassment of security guards for fear that any reprisal would jeopardize their graduating on time. Everyone I spoke with had stories of security officials humiliating students—disturbing tales of female students forced to leave school because their bra wires had set off the metal detector; experiences of being scanned for up to five minutes while security guards gossiped with each other while the student was made late to first period; being apprehended for going to the bathroom without a bathroom pass while the student ahead of them, committing the same infraction, was let go because he was a “buddy” of the security guard. Upon recalling an incident that had happened many months earlier, soon after the metal detectors were installed, Jessica’s eyes start to well up, her voice cracked as she recounted a time when she forgot to remove her belt before entering school:

I was embarrassed one time. That really got me mad. I forgot to take off my belt, I was more worried about being late for this class or my mind is somewhere else ... And I beeped or whatever, and this cop is like ‘oh, hey, everybody, look at this stupid kid, you know, dumb enough to have her belt on. Everyone laugh at her’ kinda thing. You know, he just totally screwed up my day. I even started crying. I was so embarrassed ... So it was kind of like trying to make everyone feel like crap so you won’t even dare talk back.

These stories form the backdrop upon which students actively respond to the surveillance they face daily in their schools; they also highlight the complex nature of responding to what amounts to a double surveillance. As Jessica’s story makes clear, security accomplishes two things at once: it enforces the schools rules (safety), and it embarrasses her to the point of silence in front of her peers (control). In many ways this incident captures the essence of the double-bind at work for students who are determined to graduate high school and willing to compromise or “conform” to the humiliating conditions they face in order to do so.

Given these pressures and humiliations, students I interviewed and observed soon developed a range of responses to surveillance by their peers and security. I call this tactical avoidance. Avoidance involves attempts at *evading* surveillance without eschewing the institution and its communities altogether. Given that there may be no way of *escaping* surveillance, tactical avoidance highlights an ability to cope with difficult conditions from two sources of power. It is in this sense that avoidance serves as a tactic. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de

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Certeau (1984) defines tactics as acts which “insinuate [themselves] into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (p. xix). He reminds us that a tactic is “action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element of a society is concealed. Furthermore, tactics “manipulate ... events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’”; they involve clever tricks and an intelligence for “knowing how to get away with things” (p. xix). De Certeau’s thinking offers an opportunity to assess the following discussion that took place in a focus group of thirteen students who participated in my research after school.

Jen: *So a lot of you can identify an undercover cop, but that doesn’t really get you out of being pulled over...*

Rafa: *You know when to avoid it though. Because if there’s an undercover cop there, you’re not going to do something.*

Lolo: *Epecially if you know the areas they walk around, be like, Oh I don’t want to go down there cuz I don’t feel like being harassed today. Go around, take the longer way. Don’t worry about it.*

Jen: *Does it matter that you even have to be thinking about this stuff?*

Lolo: *If it’s going to avoid harassment it don’t matter.*

This conversation seemed to reveal students’ desire to ‘manipulate events’ in order to avoid interactions with authority at all costs.

Taken from a different interview with David, another expression of tactical avoidance in response to school security reads: “instead of taking the short way, I take the long way just so I can avoid security guards. I do that a lot. Let’s say I’m walking with my friends in the hallways and we see security. Just so we can avoid their harassment, we’ll go another way.” This student’s response resonates with some of the critical literature on resistance. For instance, although James Scott maintains that conformity is tactical and manipulative and thus “an art form in which one can take some pride at having successfully misrepresented oneself” (p. 33), Scott cautions that “evasion ... is purchased at the considerable cost of contributing to the production of a public transcript that apparently ratifies the social ideology of the dominant” (p. 33). Consider a final example from Jason, one which should remind us of the terms of the public transcript embedded within these interactions:

I know the guy doesn’t like me, I know there’s going to be watching me. period. I go to a place that I don’t know, first thing when I walk in, is I look at the dude, I try to establish a sense that I’m just here to buy stuff. If I see him, I’m like “good morning” or “how are you” or, you know, not walk in with my hat low or nothing like that, just a sense of trust that I’m just here to get the stuff and wanna go home, no problems.

Certainly these instances of tactical avoidance evidence a compromise, the dark side of which is well expressed by legal scholar Patricia Williams (1992) who reflects upon “the cold game of equality staring” and her invisibility as a Black woman:

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“I could force my presence, the real me contained in those eyes, upon them, but I would be smashed in the process. If I deflect, if I move out of the way, they will never know I existed” (p. 222).

As formative spaces, then, schools seem to be teaching middle-range students how to navigate the wider terrain of citywide surveillance. Surveillance policies are subjecting urban youth to a stunning lack of privacy, conditioning them to being watched at all times and from every angle, and offering students with disciplinary and academic problems mostly punitive options. Unknowingly, schools are preparing students to participate in and appropriate the signs and symbols of everyday surveillance in and beyond schools; in turn, students are building a repertoire of tactical responses to these conditions. Although tactical avoidance, as one response to these conditions, appears limited in its ability to confront the issues these students face inside their schools, it is as surprising and significant a response to surveillance as the walkout and should not be overlooked as a form of resistance.¹² For if as Scott insists that while “appearances that power requires are, to be sure, imposed forcefully on subordinate groups . . . , they do not preclude their active use as a means of resistance and evasion” (p. 32). Embedded within these students’ responses is their astute awareness of the reality of control they experience inside their schools. This awareness, however, is also what sets the stage for and enables these same students to envision ways to exercise their freedoms in equally surprising, and potentially far-reaching ways.

Taken Together: Walkout and Tactical Avoidance

So far this article has examined the significance of both the collectively assembled walkout and the more individually oriented tactical avoidance as two strikingly different types of student responses to a landscape of increasing surveillance in urban schools. While the walkout had the appearance of being collectively organized and assembled, students attest to it being almost spontaneous, with several “popular” students helping to garner support for it on the Sconex.com website and in the cafeteria lunchroom days prior. Many of the students I spoke with had no idea, either on the day of the walkout or months later, who was responsible for organizing the protest. Its momentum seems to have arisen on the day of the event, which was largely unplanned (students report running back to their homes to grab markers and paper to make posters) and unorganized. A few students assembled out front of school and stood away from the long lines forming down the block awaiting entrance through the metal detectors. Many of those who decided to stand with the organizers, either jumped off the line or left the building after first, second, and third periods—pushing through security.

From the perspective of Jessica, who was one of the organizers and is a member of *Sistas and Brothas United*, the walkout was made up of “mostly juniors and seniors [who] were just pissed off,” adding that “no one group was responsible for it.” Its momentum seems to have been the result of mounting frustration among

students and the contributions of a few individuals—who were leading the charge by posting on Sconex.com or gathering signatures for petitions. While 1,500 students marched with a rare sense of unity, the walkout suffered not from a lack of collective purpose, but from a lack of a sense of unity. As I would come to learn throughout my conversations with other middle-range students, the pressure of being “college-bound” often prevented them from aligning with the kind of students willing to take risks and start up a protest. As Jessica, 17, clearly states:

Let's say me and my friends ... everyone's worried about passing their classes, getting 90 or above averages, going to prestigious colleges .. They're worried about that so school is a really big part of getting that. The other way, Jose's friends aren't those types of people. They're more daring. 'Hey, let's go watch a movie and cut class and do whatever.' They'll be up for it. Or let's do something together. They'll be up for it. They have that more 'let's do things together' where[as] my friends have 'I need to do things for myself right now.'

Underscoring Jessica's statement are the ways in which schools, and their methods of tracking, rewarding, and penalizing students, often prevents students from acting in unison, mobilizing in response to, or taking action against perceived injustices. Add to this a level of extreme surveillance that far surpasses what those of us not attending large urban high schools contend with and we begin to recognize a context that disables unified resistance. Caught between wanting a safe classroom environment and lacking a platform to express their outrage and frustration, students find ways to avoid and evade surveillance.

Tactical avoidance, in this sense, represents one point on a spectrum of possible responses to surveillance. Students' experiences of constantly being under the gaze of security guards armed with the metal detectors, scanning machines, and the authority to humiliate and penalize them for any infraction, and their insights about being exposed to an environment which portends to be safer yet allows for newer and more sophisticated ways for fellow students to bring in contraband items all go to show how intimately urban youth understand the paradox of school “safety” measures which, in an effort to protect students, actively criminalizes them. The outcome is a school environment of suspicion and distrust—one which is not conducive to sustained safety or collective resistance.

Because they experience surveillance as ‘eyes on me regardless,’ escaping it, even trying to confront it directly, are particularly limited and limiting types of responses. Within Ashforth and Mael's framework, tactical avoidance may best be characterized as diffuse—not targeted at the threat—and unauthorized. In her article on the formations of African-American resistance to school, Regina Day Langhout (2005) suggests that targeting a specific threat or act of injustice depends often on how much power the resistor has, and that because “children in school settings do not have a great deal of power, it is important to look for diffuse acts of resistance” (p. 125). Tactical avoidance evidences an awareness of one's lack of power in a given setting. Students are capable of intuiting what form their resistance might need to take (and what its target might be) in a given setting.

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Equally contributive is the fact that students participate in their own surveillance. Schools are sites of dual, if not multiple, surveillance as Jessica’s story at the metal detectors attests. Thus, targeting a specific threat is not so easily done. Tactical avoidance suggests that resistance to being heavily watched means *not resisting any one thing* at all; it means *not* locating a target, so much as learning to be performative, chameleonic, and savvy. In this sense, it relies on the quickness of an individual response; not a collective one. Because the threat of being singled out by authority for doing something wrong is so real, tactical avoidance represents a form of individualized, often isolated resistance: a ‘to each his own’ kind of attitude. This evokes the sense that one can evade authority best when one remains alone and under the radar. But it also signals that diffuse resistance can happen in small, unified groups as in the example in which David and a small group of friends simply “take another route” to avoid trouble with security without even verbalizing it to each other.

For schools that value smaller learning communities, student participation is essential. If tactical avoidance suggests something about how students resist macro conditions in which they feel targeted, demeaned, and disrespected, it may also go towards illuminating the meaning of their resistance to the more micro dynamics inside a classroom. At issue is *how* students participate in their education—which forms of participation offer young people opportunities to exercise independence while contesting and challenging authority. Emergent participation offers us a way to think about student responses to surveillance that is potentially more sustainable than other types of responses.

The Hip Hop Poetry Club and Emergent Participation

As students began to recognize the gradual and seemingly irreversible effects of the metal detectors on their school environment—“it’s a very unhappy place and not what you would call a learning place at all”—they began to envision new ways to “get their voices heard,” Elizabeth attests. When faced with dominant opposition, Scott claims that subordinate groups perform “feats of imagination” in which they imagine a “total reversal of the distribution of status and rewards” (p. 80). One such imaginative response and, I argue, the most enduring, was spearheaded by a group of young writers who were frustrated with the lack of student unity and voice at school. Soon after the walkout in September, Elizabeth, a student who is also a member of an after-school spoken word organization (Urban Word NYC) and a writing organization for girls (Girls Write Now), both located in downtown Manhattan, started to talk up the idea of a poetry club to her friends. By January, when I first went up to the high school to observe the club, roughly fifteen students sat in desks formed in a circle, took part in short writing exercises (led by other youth), and read aloud their free-writing or poems they crafted around an assigned-theme. David explains its creation:

[Elizabeth] wanted to start a poetry club because there’s a lack of writing clubs

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in the school and she started the whole thing. Basically what she did—she went around and started recruiting kids. There weren't no flyers around the school for poetry club; she wandered around the school. I remember she told me about it cause it was like the first day of English class and we had to write an introductory paragraph, introducing ourselves, and in it I said I like to write poetry, so [later] she was like oh, join the poetry club. I was like okay. She just went around recruiting people, that's what she did.

One factor in the club's success were these guerrilla recruitment tactics—hybrid acts that remain out of the line of sight of authority but which remain participatory in effect.

Similar to the ways hip hop culture has mobilized urban teenagers since the late 1970s and functioned as a site of resistance (Queeley, 2003; Rose, 1994; Kelley, 1998), youth writing and spoken word can serve as both a site of resistance and a response to surveillance. The creation of an after-school hip hop poetry club (an emergent community of writers and performers) is only one example of what might constitute sustainable resistance to the conditions this article addresses; but it is a particularly noteworthy one because it also generates the possibility of student freedom and intellectual advancement among other advantages.

Jennifer McCormick (2004), whose study of girl poets who use poetry to cope with and transcend their daily struggles inside and beyond NYC schools, argues that while poetry is limited in its ability to remedy “the structural failures that have plagued New York City's public school system,” it provides a space—an internal asylum—“for lament, fantasy, and elation” (p. 7). The student writers, who founded the club which became known as *Spoken Ink* and whom I came to know over the course of my research, not only used poetry to comment on and speak back to the conditions in their school, but also transformed for a couple of hours each week a threatening space into one in which school-wide surveillance became least conspicuous. James Scott contends that social spaces such as these “are themselves an achievement of resistance; they are won and defended in the teeth of power” (p. 119).

Much of the writing in the first few months of this after-school club specifically referenced the conditions in school. Although students attested to “getting used to” the disciplinary effects of the school's surveillance measures, their writing expresses the rage and disappointment they often feel but cannot express openly to those in authority. Writing offers them a space (within the space of the club itself) to rhetorically question, vent, and talk back, as a selection from Rhina's poem reflects:

*We don't need no metal detectors to keep out the knives
Take out you stapler and all of your pens
I'll stab and staple a trick and get ten day detention
Juicy juice in the school
Great no soda
Keep the sugar level low and keep students from rising up
Against staff they didn't like and stuff they be hating
I got a walkie-talkie at home
Am I in for a good stabbing?*

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*That's all the school aids are; students with big ass phones
They dress and act like us and start trouble wherever they go
There's no way to know who our oppressors are
They're like undercover agents with ghetto ass accents*

Neither the walkout nor tactical avoidance brought about the removal of metal detectors, however, both helped generate the need and desire for ways in which students could safely voice their frustrations and concerns. In their conceptualization of learning as situated and socially constituted, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) argue that participation in social practice is crucial to knowing. They offer the concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” as a conceptual bridge between the “production of knowledgeable identities and the production of communities of practice” (p. 55). While students’ tended to experience the walkout as members of a group, somewhat eclipsing their individualized roles as agents/actors (which helps explain why students didn’t organize another walkout and also why they were so critical of it), their participation in *Spoken Ink* is both as an individual and as a member of a group. Certainly the ways in which students contend with school surveillance offer myriad learning opportunities, however Lave and Wenger call us to “think of sustained learning as embodying, albeit in transformed ways, the structural characteristics of communities of practice” (p. 55).

In this sense, the walkout made the club possible because it exposed the value of participation and the potential for growth and learning. Although tactical avoidance is expressed as an isolated experience and an individualized response, it is also a response that participates in a common struggle. *Spoken Ink*, by way of contrast, is a response to surveillance that has ably transformed a site of containment into one in which students and their thoughts are actively sealed off not from the effects of surveillance (as the poetry certainly goes to show), but from the guards themselves.

Little by little, as the months wore on, the club became the safest and most productive place for learning at any hour of the day. As they progressed, the poets caught the eye of other English teachers who, in turn, invited members to come in to their classes and perform poems and raps for younger students. Elizabeth attests that talking to freshmen about school or about any of their concerns is one of the most powerful aspects of being a member of the club:

We went to visit two freshman classes and I can honestly say that that was one of the best things we could do. I read this poem called ‘Air Jordans’ [from Aloud! Anthology of Nuyorican Poets] and the poem was about how this student [dealt with] peer pressure ... and he killed somebody for his sneakers cuz he didn’t have the money. And although we don’t see that as much now, I still read that poem because it still has value to it. And then David read his poem ‘Changes’ about how we need to get together, go to school, this and that. Lloyd talked about his relationship with his mother and how it isn’t good but that he still has respect for women. And we just talked to them. We told them, ‘we’re your age, we’re no different than you, but we see things and hopefully as freshmen you guys can see what’s going on around you.’ And Ayesha, she was amazing. She read a poem about a 17-year-old girl who gets pregnant from a 35 year old. And they were laughing.

And I asked them, 'Why are you laughing? We have a Life Center on the 3rd Floor.' I asked them, 'How many of you know a teenager who's pregnant?' Only two people didn't raise their hand. Everybody else raised their hand. And I'm like, 'So why are you laughing?' That hit them hard and they were like, 'oh shit.' So, I feel like that's probably going to be one of my highlights leaving high school... Our poetry was the back-up. The best thing was us talking to them.

As Elizabeth's statement attests, the hip hop poetry club is a community of practice that is engaged in the "generative process of producing its own future" (Lave & Wenger, pp. 57-58). Members are not simply concerned with displaying their talents for writing and poetry, but also want to communicate with and pass along knowledge (the hidden transcript) to their younger classmates. One of the club's strongest initiatives was to "recruit younger students." These efforts at communicating with classmates are not sanctioned by the institution, and yet they are vital to establishing autonomous spaces where students can exist and breathe *within* the surveilled environment of school. That *Spoken Ink* was created by students for students is a reminder that spaces such as these are not gifted, and do not merely occupy the "social space left empty by domination" (Scott, p. 123). Though they can be supported and facilitated by authority figures such as teachers and counselors, clubs of this kind must be "won, cleared, built, and defended" by those who need them most (p. 123). My research findings suggest that conditions in these schools are dire enough to warrant fighting for spaces of this kind, and that students are capable of creating and sustaining them on their own with minimal (but some) support from an encouraging teacher or advisor.

Within Ashforth and Mael's framework, emergent participation troubles the dichotomous framing of resistance. It represents a hybridization of the distinguishing features of resistance. It is neither authorized nor unauthorized; neither facilitative nor oppositional. It is both. Writing, in the context of *Spoken Ink*, and under the gaze of suspicion, comes to represent both an individuated and collective form of resistance. While it is truer everyday that schools represent sites "marbled with liberatory possibilities and predatory surveillance" (Ruck et al., p. 2), what we learn by looking at the multiple ways in which these students responded to their school's decision to install metal detectors is that they are often seeking ways to participate within this marbled landscape. And that as such, participation in school, and in their own learning—whether it be showing up at the door each morning only to be held up at the metal detectors or staying late after school to write rhymes with peers—must be considered as existing on an open-ended continuum of resistance.

Conclusion

Given the likelihood that the country's public schools will continue to adopt policies of containment replete with surveillance technologies and policing mechanisms, it will be important for researchers and educators to look closely at the ways students respond to these policies. Although it remains imperative that youth advocates, community-based organizers, and academics continue to respond ag-

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gressively to punitive public policies that target urban youth of color, my research suggests that it will be of increasing importance to look closely at the multiple ways students are navigating surveillance inside schools. I am hopeful that we will find ways to support their efforts—even when these efforts remain unsanctioned by the institution itself. Under the watchful eyes of authority, perhaps that is how they should remain.

Notes

¹ There are several layers of security—New York Police Officers (NYPD), School Safety Agents (SSA), Security Guards, Deans/hallway monitors. The SSA are those who monitor the metal detectors/scanners and the ones students come most in contact with (other than the Deans). They are the lowest ranked officers of the NYPD. They are, in one student's words, “the Riker's-hired officers—they're crazy—they think that we're the criminals. And that's how we're treated.”

² Their perceptions that heightened surveillance breeds excessive suspicion on the part of authority echo the sentiments of over 900 youth surveyed in Michelle Fine et al's participatory action research with youth entitled, “‘Anything Can Happen with Police Around’: Urban Youth Evaluate Strategies of Surveillance in Public Places” (Fine, Freudenberg, Payne, Perkins, Smith, and Wanzer, 2003).

³ The quote is how one male participant characterized his relationship to surveillance.

⁴ The New York City Public School system enrolls approximately 1.1 million students in over 1,400 schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2003-4).

⁵ One example of this are the hallway “sweeps” between classes where students caught outside of class after the bell rings are literally “swept” away into detention—three of which invoke suspension.

⁶ As reported in the Gotham Gazette, “New York City Council STATED MEETING - November 10, 2004-10 Nov 2004”. <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article//20041110/203/1253>. “Of the 1,300 schools in New York City, only 155 currently have security cameras. The council also allocated \$120 million in the 5-year capital budget for new security cameras, which cost approximately \$75,000 per school to install.”

⁷ Urban Word NYC is an after-school poetry, spoken word, and hip hop organization that provides New York City teenagers free after-school workshops, all-youth open mic spaces, and an annual teen poetry slam. It was founded in 1999.

⁸ Like so many youth I have encountered at this high school, these students work hard, do their best to attend class, and continue to believe in the possibility of education. My decision to work with “middle-range” students stems from a desire to capture the ways that surveillance practices in schools affect not only the most vulnerable students (i.e., those who skip class, wander the hallways, bring in contraband items—those who tend to acquire the moniker of “trouble” students), but also how these same practices impact students who are “doing right” by the system. Based on my work and research in urban settings, I have come to believe middle-range students offer important and diverse lessons for research and agendas for change—especially their responses to the circumstances that they face in school. Given the growing climate of fear and suspicion surrounding public education and its students in urban settings, middle-range students offer urban educators and researchers deeper insight into the possibilities for creating and sustaining change.

⁹ Metro Briefing | “New York: Bronx: 3 Arrested In Subway Killing” (*NY Times*, Thomas

J. Lueck, compiled by Anthony Ramirez, April 14, 2005): “Three people have been charged in the killing of Marviel Martinez, 17, of the Bronx, who was attacked with a machete Tuesday morning on a subway platform as he waited with two friends for a train to school, the police said early this morning. The three, all Bronx residents, were identified as Alex Ramirez, 15, who was charged with murder, assault and criminal possession of a weapon; Bolivar Pichardo, 17, who was charged with murder; and Lucas Denis, 18, who was charged with murder. The two friends of Mr. Martinez were also stabbed in the attack around 8 a.m. on the uptown No. 4 platform at 183rd Street and Jerome Avenue, the police said.”

¹⁰ Sistas and Brothas United is a grassroots, community-based organization that works closely with high schools in the surrounding areas. The high school in question is one of its projects. It is also the Bronx affiliate of Urban Youth Collective, a downtown-based program designed to help urban youth organize and resist unfair school policies. Though SBU was not responsible for initiating the walkout, it was on-site to insure that students were not harassed by the police. SBU also supported student organizers of the walkout in an advisory role.

¹¹ Many students expressed disappointment at what the walkout failed to achieve: “*it could have been so much more and then it wasn't. I know a lot of them feel like they didn't really achieve anything. We still have metal detectors or we still have cops harassing us or embarrassing us in the morning.*”

¹² Resistance, within education, is often framed in one of two ways: (1) participating in a collective struggle to be heard with the *intention* of addressing a set of conditions or constraints, or (2) as oppositional—when an individual acts out *without the intention* of changing conditions (Langhout, 2005, p. 125). I argue for a more complicated notion of the concept.

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