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Marcelo Diversi

Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies 2006; 6; 370

DOI: 10.1177/1532708605285623

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Street Kids in Nikes: In Search of Humanization Through the Culture of Consumption

Marcelo Diversi
Independent Scholar

Brazilian street kids have been represented, with few exceptions, as victims of oppressed cultural forces that weaken the family and dilute social capital. To be sure, concentrated poverty, loss of extended family ties, low levels of education, and lack of governmental involvement have all given shape to a terribly strenuous childhood for many in the country. These kids, however, are more than victims. They are also active agents in the coconstruction of their social realities, and they struggle in brave ways to become fuller human beings. Using reconstructions from my ethnographic fieldwork on the streets of Campinas, Brazil, in which kids encounter Nike artifacts and the culture of consumption, the author attempts to show this struggle for humanization. In addition, a central purpose of this article is to present a slice of social science research written in a self-reflective manner about authorship, interpretation, and the interweaving of theory and fieldwork.

Keywords: street kids; culture of consumption; humanization; Brazil; authorship; representation; interpretation

Old-Fashioned Nikes

The day was unusually hot for that time of the year, and the bright sunlight seemed to have inflamed the kids. They were all over the place, begging for money at the surrounding stoplights while playing soccer with empty soda cans on the sidewalk, chasing each other down the streets swaying around the moving cars and speeding buses, often disappearing from my sight. I had been hanging around for more than three hours when Lico, a fast-speaking young boy, sat by my side on the edge of the sidewalk.

"Don't you live in the United States?" Lico asked.

"Yes, I've been living there for a while now," I said, expecting him to ask something about the fragments of American culture he'd seen on TV during the soccer World Cup '94 that had just ended.

"So how come are you wearing these old-fashioned Nike shoes?" he said, opening a big smile.

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies, Volume 6 Number 3, 2006 370-390
DOI: 10.1177/1532708605285623
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“But I just bought them before I came to Brazil three months ago!” I reacted, somewhat surprised, looking down at my black Nike cross-training shoes.
 “And you bought this old model anyway, huh?” Lico said, rolling backwards with laughter.

Two boys who had been kicking cans around a few yards away walked toward us smiling and looking at me.

“Why didn’t you buy an Air Jordan?” said one of them.
 “What’s the difference?” I asked.

The three of them were soon, all at once, saying things like having better cushioning, jumping higher, protecting joints, enhancing performance, and moving really fast. I felt like I was in a Nike commercial. Before I could ask how they knew about all that, the kids were already chasing one another making dunking moves in the air and sticking their tongues out. In seconds, they were on the other side of the swarming avenue.

* * * *

I lived in the southern, more industrialized part of Brazil for 23 years. I remember being very little, 7 or 8 years old, and seeing kids my size running around downtown Sao Paulo in torn and dirty clothes, shoeless, with bad hair, and—most striking to me at that time—with no adults looking after them. “They are street kids,” said my father.¹ I also remember holding my father’s hand tighter whenever I saw a group of them walking toward us. “Who is going to take care of them?” I wanted to know. “Life.” That was what my father would always answer.

It was early 1970s, and Sao Paulo City was already the largest and richest city in Brazil, with an industrialization process boosted by “modernization loans” negotiated with the International Monetary Fund and other international agencies, an era referred to today as the “economic miracle period.” As the demand for low-skill jobs increased and the myth of economic prosperity reached the northern, poorer regions of Brazil, the number of immigrants from those regions coming to Sao Paulo also increased. The governmental focus on industrialization and the unstable and precarious life in the isolated agricultural areas of the North and Northeast regions of Brazil led millions of people to view the big city as their best ticket out of misery.

Following a Third World pattern, the city welcomed the labor the immigrants brought but made no effort to develop urbanization accordingly. The results were lack of housing, drinking water, sewage system, transportation, school facilities, health care, and, perhaps most significant in the case of street kids, lack of social capital (i.e., a network of people beyond the immediate family pooling resources together). The *favelas* (ghettos) were the only places newcomers could find—build—shelter, and the often precarious living conditions

generally prevented communities from organizing wide and efficient social networks for the pooling of resources and time needed for cooking, health care, and childrearing.

Without their extended families, often left behind in their native lands, enough money to feed all family members (large poor families have been a Catholic legacy in many Latin countries), and social capital, parents in poor families have had to struggle for resources in the streets. Many were (have been) forced to send their children to go and beg on the streets of market and business areas for additional income. Others seem to have been unable to prevent their children from gradually slipping away from the family's reach. These kids, then, tend to find their way to downtown areas, where other poor children and adolescents have lived and where the high concentration of people, business offices, shops, and food stores increases their chances of fulfilling basic needs and finding entertainment.

Clearly, the socioeconomic forces that have marginalized children and adolescents lacking economic and social support, turning the streets into an attractive (comparatively speaking) site for survival, are much more complex than I am able to describe here. To begin with, street children have been part of the Brazilian reality long before the economic changes of the early 1970s. For instance, Jorge Amado (1937), one of the most important contemporary novelists in Brazil, made the street kids of Salvador, the capital of Bahia and one of the oldest cities in Brazil, the protagonists of a famous novel, *Captains of the Sand*, written in the 1930s. Although the Captains' dreams of an affectionate family, acceptance in social circles, learning trades, wealth, and prestige can still be traced in today's street kids, the modern and postmodern periods have brought additional challenges.

The industrialization period brought different forms of oppression to the street kids' conditions, such as more destructive drugs and weapons, quasi-institutionalized death squads, and exposure to environmental hazards characteristic of large urban centers (i.e., pollution, chemically contaminated food and water, high crime rates). Moreover, the current postindustrial economic regime, whose privileging of knowledge in technology, communication, and image manipulation has greatly widened the gap between those who have access to resources and those who do not, has contributed to the further stigmatization of street kids.

The representations of street kids in the printed and televised media mainly focus on infractions and violations of cultural norms, and the population is generously offered with photo and video shootings of kids smoking crack, pick-pocketing, exchanging money with suspicious adults, or greedily eating with dirty hands. The black strip covering the kids' eyes, mandatory by law in Brazilian photojournalism, might help conceal individuals' identities, but it does not prevent audiences from associating the kids with socially undesirable images (while offering no information on what may possibly have led the kids to engage in those activities in the first place).

There are other major social forces affecting street kids' conditions in Brazil. The deeply ingrained uneven distribution of resources and wealth is best illustrated by a recent United Nations study, the Human Development Report (United Nations Development Programme, 1995), which ranks Brazil, among 174 countries, last in distribution of household income when the richest and poorest 20% of the population are compared. An exceptionally large percentage of the Brazilian population, therefore, grow up with less food, health care, and emotional and physical security than what is defined (at least in the Western cultures) as basic human rights (at the same time that they are frequently exposed to extreme wealth). The exact extent of hopelessness caused by this grave inequality may be unknown, but its sign can be seen in the eyes of every child who puts a forehead against your closed car window while you wait for the traffic light to turn green.

The control that the churches historically have had over the philanthropic structure in Brazil also shapes the street kids' conditions. Even though a few successful nongovernmental organizations and municipal programs are beginning to occupy more space in some large urban centers, the church has been the basis of the country's "welfare" system for decades and, for the most part, the only option for kids wanting to leave the streets. Despite the promoted positive aspects, such as community involvement, pooling of resources, and spiritual development, that are usually associated with religion, the church alone has been unable to offer effective help. The work of the church is largely conducted by volunteers, which imposes problems on several levels: (a) Volunteers are less obligated to fulfill work expectations than professionals; (b) turnover among volunteers is incredibly high, which jeopardizes the continuity and rapport necessary for any successful intervention; (c) volunteers often cannot work full-time, for they must work for money elsewhere, unless (d) they come from upper economic classes, which often results in value clashes with those needing succor. In addition, churches invariably work from their particular religious standpoints, which almost as invariably diverge from (i.e., are more limiting than) more secular notions of human rights.²

* * * *

I moved from Sao Paulo City to a smaller, high per capita town 2 hours west when I was 9 years old and didn't see much of street kids until I went out to college in the mid-1980s. My university was in Campinas, a large urban center 50 miles west of Sao Paulo City, and downtown, where most of middle- and upper-class families live and shop, was already the home of some street kids. A relevant point to my argument here is that even though I hadn't really seen, or interacted with, street kids for years, I "knew" that they were dangerous little criminals. I was much bigger than the street kids by then, and I no longer crossed to the other side of the street when I walked by. But I would always hold my backpack tighter or would try to hide the volume of my wallet, even when I tried to make

small talk with one of these kids. Where did that fear, that image, which shaped and informed my (inter)actions with these kids, come from? How did I learn about who street kids were and what they did? How was my “knowledge” formed? I see now that my “knowledge” of street kids had been entirely informed by the stories I experienced (i.e., stories I’d heard and occasionally helped construct) about them in the few conversations, TV documentaries and news, magazines, and newspapers that addressed the street children’s condition. Inevitably, I (inter)acted with them based on this knowledge.

As the years went by, living in Campinas as a university student with a privileged economic condition, that previous “knowledge” based solely on stories was transformed and reshaped by increased encounters with street kids whenever I went downtown. Kids started to pop out of every street corner, it seemed. It was late 1980s, the world was going through an economic recession, especially the so-called Third World countries, and the Brazilian economy had an inflation of more than 2,000% a year. The minimum wage was a little less than \$70 per month, with approximately 40 million people, according to official numbers, living on minimum wage salaries. A person did not need to know the economic indexes to feel a poverty boom in the streets.

Kids were in the intersections of busy avenues of downtown Campinas, where the stoplights gave them an opportunity to beg through car windows. The habit of giving money to the poor can be traced back to the widespread Catholic concept of charity and, perhaps, to the social guilt rooted in the extremely uneven distribution of resources. Grocery stores and restaurants in the downtown area quickly became a preferred hangout place for kids living in the streets; in addition to the occasional coin, the kids could often count on doggy-bags, a banana, or, on luckier days, a candy.

The open markets in the downtown area were also popular among the street kids but for slightly different reasons. These markets, concentrated around bus station areas, primarily serve citizens with less economic power, who work for the middle- and upper-class families as maids, gardeners, and other household assistants (e.g., laundresses, cooks, nannies). These citizens, with most of their time consumed by long shifts in low-paid jobs, often take advantage of the markets strategically situated between their workplace and transportation sites to buy food, clothes, and housekeeping items. They are usually sympathetic toward the street kids (many come from similar conditions) and will often share food and the little money they have. The open markets also attract a great number of women, elders, and handicapped people, who are often the kids’ preferred targets for small thefts.

I never went to these markets, but once in a while, I saw street kids leaning against my car door, asking for some change, their eyes examining the inside of the car. I wanted to be nice to them. At the same time, I kept an eye on their hands. Why was I afraid of little pocketknives in their little dirty hands? I often saw street kids on my way out of restaurants. I gave them money almost just as often, never thinking about how they were going to use it. I tried to talk to them

sometimes. “Hi,” I would say. The kid would look at me, say “Hi” very softly or say nothing at all and stand nearby for a few seconds while I struggled to find something else to say. Most often, however, I tried to avoid places where street kids hung out.

* * * *

In 1990, I moved from Brazil to the United States. I went to graduate school in the fall and spring semesters and flew back to Brazil for summer vacations. Each time, I saw many more kids in the streets of Campinas, the city in which I went to college and where most of my friends still lived. By my summer vacation in 1993, they were literally everywhere downtown. Sometimes, I would just sit with a newspaper in hand in the market area and watch the street kids move about. “So many of them,” I remember thinking. I just watched. For a long time, I watched from far away.

Meanwhile, in some of my graduate courses, I had been learning about social theory, theories of liberation and emancipation, kinds of social science that were concerned with change toward a society more just for more people. I began to experience the empowerment of interpretive epistemologies in my own life, reinventing and rewriting my self-hood through emancipatory interpretations of my lived experiences. I was becoming gradually more able to deconstruct the taken-for-granted standards for evaluating one’s worth in society, realizing that my noncompetitive nature wasn’t necessarily a sign of weakness of self, for instance. I became consciously aware that competitiveness signifies strength in males according to a patriarchal value system that I did not want to endorse. But I didn’t need to live by this value system. What a simple and sweet discovery it was. I saw alternatives to being more than weak as a noncompetitive male. I could subscribe to humanistic values, where cooperation and kindness were considered strengths, even in a young man. The thought of becoming more than what the dominant patriarchal system reserved for those like me was empowerment itself. I began to feel I had the tools—the language—to make sense of intuitive notions about the fluidity of meaning and the uncertainty of reality I had struggled with during adolescence. I started thinking that others who felt oppressed, however articulate this feeling might be, could also find liberation through stories and narratives that describe a world they (can) relate to. I still remember the power that a passage by Laurel Richardson (1990) had at this turning point:

Most significant are the transformative possibilities of the collective story. At the individual level, people make sense of their lives through the stories that are available to them, and they attempt to fit their lives into the available stories. People live by stories. If the available narrative is limiting, destructive, or at odds with the actual life, people’s lives end up being limited and textually disenfranchised. Collective stories that deviate from standard cultural plots provide new narratives; hearing them legitimates replotting one’s own life. New narratives

offer the patterns for new lives. The story of the transformed life, then, becomes a part of the cultural heritage affecting future stories, future lives. (p. 26)

Richardson moves on to discuss the transformative possibilities of the collective story. She advocates the notion that by linking people who share similar experiences, even without knowing each other at a personal level, “the collective story overcomes some of the isolation and alienation of contemporary life” (p. 26). Amid the excitement of these recent personal, intellectual discoveries, I began to believe that I could finally do something to help street kids in my homeland. All I ever knew about them was informed by stories told by politicians, priests, journalists, friends, family, and other people sharing my own privileged socioeconomic condition. Now I knew I was missing the most important version: that of street kids. There were other stories circulating at the margins of the dominant discourse: the kids’ own stories about their lives in the streets, the stories told by those working closely with the kids in the streets on a daily basis.

Foucault’s (1980) notion that the oppressed and underprivileged have no material means to create space for their narratives in the dominant discourse began to make much more sense to me. When I started my ethnographic project with the street kids of Campinas in June 1994, I was amazed to learn for the first time that there had been people being paid to work in the streets with the kids for more than 2 years. I only spent 3 months a year in Brazil, so how would I know, right? But not a single one of my friends from Campinas, nor my family for that matter, knew about the existence of the “street educators,” as they are officially called. The street kids were “out there,” the street educators were “out there,” but not their stories. And with no knowledge of these stories, a municipal program had been developed and implemented, religious charity organized, and international financial aid allocated (the Inter-American Development Bank gave more than \$4 million to institutions working with street kids in Campinas from 1994 to 1996/1997), all with the idea of helping street kids. It seemed that the most important piece of information was being ignored, wittingly or not, by the discussants of the street youth’s condition. So to hear their stories, to try and expand the narratives about the street kids’ realities, and to show to them the possibility of self-empowerment, I set out to Brazil on my first ethnographic project in May 1994.

I heard and participated in many stories with the street kids, adopting a methodological standpoint defined by Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) as critical ethnography. I expected that the central precepts of the ethnographic method of systematic observation situated in cultural immersion into my participants’ daily lives would allow me to collect stories from the street youth themselves. But I also wanted to acknowledge that I was not merely an observer but a participant in the experiences I was documenting, coconstructing. Furthermore, the critical standpoint validated my intent to engage in reflection on my role as researcher and analyze the power struggles shaping these kids’ lives

and our shared experiences in the streets (in particular, race, adult versus youth authority, and social class). I became a street educator and started to spend many hours a day with these youth in the streets of downtown Campinas, reconstructing the mental field notes in as much detail as I could remember at the end of each day.

The ethnographic experience among the street youth of Campinas seemed typical of what I had read in my scholarly training. Immersing myself in the street kids' culture was thrilling, beginning to see the rationale behind their behavior was exciting in its validation of the critical approach I had chosen as an epistemological parameter, and feeling accepted by them gave me a sense of ethnographic and moral pride. To be sure, I was also often frightened for these kids' probable fate and for my own powerlessness to make effective changes in their lives. I could often help them overcome mundane hurdles, but I was always very aware I could not steer them away from the destructive margins of our society. Furthermore, I was constantly embarrassed by the contrast between my daily life and that of the kids'. After spending the day and evenings with the kids, I went back to my sister's comfortable and safe apartment, where I lived during my many months of fieldwork. After having spent hours fighting public servants to get food, clean water, and clothes for the kids, I would go back home for a hot shower, abundant food, and a soft bedspread. I believe the tensions provoked by the difference in socioeconomic status and access between ethnographer and "ethnographees" are unavoidable, whether acknowledged or not. In my case, I tried to deal with this ethnographic predicament by focusing on the little help I was able to provide and by promising myself and the kids I was going to represent them in less stereotypical, more multidimensional ways.

What was not so typical of the ethnographic experience, I felt, was my idiosyncratic position as an insider at the macrocultural level as well as an outsider at the microlevel of social interaction with the youth. I shared the same nationality, same regional customs, and spoke the same language as the street youth I was studying. On the other hand, I had never lived on the streets, I had been brought up in a structured and nurturing family circle, and I had had access to education and capitalistic dreams (i.e., dreams of status quo, stability, consumption power). Moreover, I had never experienced the outright rejection and belittlement these youth did on a daily basis. Whereas in my academic circles I was seen as an insider, among the street youth, I was perceived as an outsider. What was an educated, upper-class, blue-eyed Brazilian doing among *gente* (people) such as street kids? Although this question was posed in such direct manner only a handful of times during my fieldwork, I sensed it in almost all initial interactions with the street youth and other street educators. This rather blurred line between insider and outsider represented a challenge in my quest to develop trusting relationships with the street kids and to offer an agenda-free analysis of my ethnographic experience. I believe that my reliable presence among and advocacy for the street kids, over time, helped me over-

come my initial position as an untrustworthy outsider. From being regarded as the Brazilian researcher who lived in the United States, I became regarded as a street educator who could help them get a bath or a dentist appointment. As for the analytical part of my ethnography with these street youth, I have attempted to position myself as an outsider who was accepted and trusted but who nevertheless could not enter their minds or speak for them. The best I could do, and have tried to do in the short stories presented in this article, was to position myself as a participant and observer with a view from “somewhere”—a view from a trusted outsider who wanted to make sense of these street youth’s lived experiences against a background informed by theories of power, identity, and humanization. To create a sense of being there, of seeing oneself in the skin of the street youth, I decided to represent my ethnographic experience through stories reconstructed from my fieldnotes.

Although often disheartening, most of the stories were not surprising. They were mostly stories about their troubled families, about leaving home, dropping out of school, obtaining and doing drugs, running away from the police, resistance, courage, fear, hunger, and other experiences that, most likely, you and I never lived through. What I did not expect were the “Nike stories” that I am sharing here.³ I had heard about street kids killing for Nike shoes even before I started fieldwork. To my knowledge, these kids were in their late teens and thus had had time to become well socialized into the economic value of Nike products. Indeed, in the cases that were publicized, the economic value of Nike shoes seems to have been the sole motivation for the kids to take them by force from others. According to the stories told in the newspapers, the street kids quickly sold the stolen Nike shoes as soon as they were back in their own neighborhoods (poor suburbs that are often the hideaway of drug dealers, gigolos, and other outlaws who can deal with stolen products protected from public scrutiny and police harassment).

The “Nike stories” I am presenting here, however, reflect and constitute a more sophisticated understanding of the cultural consumerism pervasive in the capitalist world rather than a mere attempt at economic gains. The kids I hung out with seemed less concerned with the economic value of the Nike products and more interested in the symbolic status attached to them. They were attentive to issues of authenticity and fashion and showed concern for their personal safety when wearing Nike products.

The “old-fashioned Nike” passage at the beginning of this text, for instance, speaks of the kids’ understanding of and, in their own way, engagement in the Nike culture. Lico and his friends, while standing on their bare dirty feet, were aware of the fact that my Nike shoes were not the latest model of Nike shoes and even mocked me for wearing such old-fashioned shoes when I had access to newer and thus, in their rationale, better products. By showing off his knowledge and teasing me, Lico was questioning my choice, perhaps in an unconscious attempt to compensate for his lack of material power, as if he were saying, “If I had the money and the access, I would know how to choose better.” The

three kids, not even in their teens yet, knew that Nike Air Jordans were the top of the line, or at least the most fashionable of the Nike shoes at the time. Even more illustrative of their knowledge, in my opinion, was their elaboration on the qualities of the Air Jordan shoes, using marketing lingo such as good cushioning, higher jumping, enhanced performance, and joint protection. Their dunking moves, with the infamous tongue sticking out, also showed their knowledge of the icon, Michael Jordan, who gave (sold) his name to the shoes, as well as their knowledge of the images used in the media to connect the basketball superstar with the Nike product.

With the globalization of economies and communication strategies and given that the nearly 150 million Brazilians compose a promising market, Nike corporation reached Brazil in the late 1980s. Initially, Nike products became known to a small number of economically privileged people. It was a common practice for the affluent to bring back Nike shoes from work or leisure trips to the United States as gifts for their children. At school, or sports clubs, Nike shoes symbolized good taste and high socioeconomic power. In the early 1990s, the Brazilian TV was beginning to show Andre Agassi and Michael Jordan doing their spectacular moves on the courts. The Nike symbol appeared more and more on the clothes and shoes of successful athletes. Now, with satellite and cable TV becoming popular in Brazil, people see not only the icons playing their sports but also starring in clever (and numerous) Nike commercials.

Nike also entered the Brazilian minds through Hollywood movies. For instance, Spielberg and Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future*, which crowded movie theaters in Brazil, had relatively long Nike ads in the script: Michael J. Fox was shown in complete ecstasy before a 21st-century-looking pair of Nikes. And this is not an isolated case. The vast majority of films shown in Brazilian movie theaters are Hollywood productions, and the Nike "swoosh" appears in many of them.

Nike represents an international image or, more specifically, an American image. Until 1998, when the Brazilian national soccer team signed a millionaire contract with Nike, there was not a significant number of famous national athletes endorsing the company. People became more familiar with the "Just Do It" products through American sport stars, which indeed seemed to increase the commercial value of Nike products. It was a masterpiece of capitalist cultural colonization: For the longest time, Nike did not need to make ads in Brazil or find Brazilian athletes to sponsor or invest money on Brazilian grounds or even speak Portuguese to conquer the Brazilian market. Until the more recent and powerful wave of globalization, "staying" in America was a successful marketing strategy for Nike to sell more in Brazil.

Although street children generally have no access to movies, they all watch some TV (in the markets, institutions, bars, at someone's home). They are especially interested in sports and often display the typical knowledge of more economically privileged fans about athletes' sponsors and achievements. Street kids cannot afford, at least legally, to engage in the culture of consumption that

Nike epitomizes, but nonetheless, most seem to be aware of the commodities at stake through a combination of media and personal interactions. This is an example of how global communication strategies have been greatly shaping the lives not only of those with access and knowledge on the new information technologies, as already commonly believed, but also of those living at the margins of such access and knowledge. To my understanding, the street kids' knowledge of Nike products and other commercial goods did not differ from that of their wealthier peers.

I find Baudrillard's (1988) notion of "hyperreality" very useful here as a theoretical framework. Hyperreality is a term coined by Baudrillard to refer to the fact that the media saturation in our information society has made people, to a great extent, perceive and interpret lived experiences holographically, creating what he called "persuasive fictions." Filmic, photographic, and electronic representations have had a profound effect on the cultural narratives that shape people's identity, often creating feelings of anxiety and despair. Much of what we, (post)modern human beings, know of ourselves and the world around is informed and shaped by the persuasive fictions portrayed in the hyperreality of TV, cinema, and the Internet. This can be especially troublesome for those at the margins looking into the hyperreal standards of success and humanness. As Adrienne Rich insightfully writes, "when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing" (quoted in Rosaldo, 1989, p. xxi). As irreverent as some Nike ads might seem, a street kid would never find herself in the world of "Just Do It."

In the current hyperreal cultural condition, people are often presented with images and messages that represent norms of beauty, social interaction, economic transactions, and social status that are not attainable in their own lived experiences. These moments of "psychic disequilibrium" become part of daily life, possibly making one feel like an outcast and thus less human. For instance, many street kids I have worked with since 1994 complained to me that they didn't have Nikes. "Everybody on TV has Nike shoes," said Igor frowning. "Yeah, and if I had Air Jordans, I'd run so fast nobody'd catch me after a *bote* [a Portuguese word used by the kids to refer to small thefts in the streets]," his brother added sharply. The hyperreal social condition, reaching beyond individual lives into social contexts such as the family, the community, and the workplace, all greatly affected by the new information technologies (Castells, 1997), may be very oppressive for the street kids. For they are bombarded with images and messages saying that consumerism is an ideal way to fulfill existential needs, equating power of consumption with success and superiority, and that any "normal" human being has access to the essential pleasures of material consumption. The trivialization of consumerism by the media shapes consciousness, especially young ones, to the point where to become a fuller human being one must participate successfully, according to the dominant society's standards, in the culture of material consumption and accumulation. The kids

do not see or find themselves in this preferred representation of reality and thus are likely to perceive themselves (and be perceived by others) as lesser human beings.

As Friedman (1991) posits, “the ontology of modernity is organized to desacralize and neutralize reality by reducing it to human production. No fixed selfhood can be found in a universe of arbitrary human constructions” (p. 159). Consuming desires have become a pervasive ingredient of modern existence. The act of consuming is mainly motivated by a desire to give meaning to one’s life, creating an identity space and making sense of lived experiences by giving life to an imagined selfhood. Consumption, Friedman further argues,

expresses a romantic longing to become an other in an existential situation where whatever one becomes must eventually be disenchanting by the knowledge that all identity is an arrangement of man-made [sic] products, thus an artifice. No authentic identity is possible, so consumption must go on in quest of a fulfillment that can never be attained. (p. 158)

In this vein, consumption becomes an ideal way in which the underprivileged may, at least temporarily, stabilize their unhinged social condition and form their identities in relation to the larger culture (of consumption) (Lee, 1993). Thus, to own and display Nikes, regardless of one’s social class (but especially significant in the case of street children), is not an attempt to become what one is not but to become more than one already is by means of climbing the ladder of social status; if only for a brief moment, it is a sweet illusion.

* * * *

Imported Nike Cap

It was my third day out on the streets of Campinas. Magali, a street educator who was my initial mentor in the realities of street life, and I were walking to a viaduct where kids usually hung out when we saw someone sitting alone by the half-empty creek that runs between two busy avenues. As we got closer, Magali recognized Lucio, a 13-year-old boy who she’d known for a couple of years. His eyelids were heavy and his hands and face were all dirty from the pink nail polish he’d been sniffing. His arms moved slowly around Magali’s neck when she leaned forward to give him a tight hug. I stood there watching those two doing the typical Brazilian greeting of kissing and hugging. Magali introduced me to Lucio as a friend of hers. I shook his weakened hand and sat down in front of him, a little uncomfortable with his suspicious gaze toward me. They hadn’t seen each other for a few weeks, and Lucio was telling Magali his latest adventures between one sniff and another.

“I’ll leave now if you don’t stop sniffing this shit,” Magali said calmly but firmly.

He smiled at her and put the plastic bag with the nail polish away. I just listened while they talked. Lucio looked at the bag Magali had on her lap.

“What ya have in there?” he asked.

“Games,” she said, taking them out of the bag. “Wanna play dominoes?”

After we’d been playing for a while, Lucio began to look at the cars and people that were passing by. He’d won again and, looking at me, asked if my Nike cap was imported.

“No,” I quickly lied, embarrassed at my unwitting ostentation.

“Can I see it?” he asked, trying to hide a smile in the corner of his mouth.

I passed him the cap sure that I wouldn’t be caught lying, for the Nike tag inside the cap, whose English words would have been a giveaway, had fallen off a few weeks before. Lucio took my cap in his hands and started counting the stitched sewing lines on top of the visor. “It’s imported,” he said handing the cap back to me.

“How do you know?” I asked, surprised.

“It has eight lines on the visor,” he said, collecting the domino tiles from the floor.

“So if a cap has eight lines sewed on the top of the visor, it’s got to be imported?” I asked, still baffled.

“Yeah. Everybody knows that!” Lucio said, frowning, which I read as a sign of disdain for my ignorance.

Lucio and Magali began to talk about something else. I was still puzzled by his ability to identify a foreign commodity. I wondered whether it had been a good guess or whether he really could make that distinction based on such a small detail.

I was out on the streets again the next day, and another boy, Tatu, asked to see my cap. Again the sewing lines on the visor of my Nike cap were being carefully counted.

“This is an imported cap,” he said, placing it back on my head.

“How do you know that?” I asked, still not believing that he would give the same explanation given by Lucio the day before.

“It has eight lines on the top of the visor,” he said, uninterestedly.

‘What a strange thing to know,’ I wrote down as I typed my fieldnotes that night.

The same thing happened a few other times during the months I hung out with the street kids that year, which assured me that Lucio’s wasn’t an isolated, random kind of knowledge. The street kids’ understanding of the value and status of commodities is illustrated, again, in this episode. The recognition of the higher value of imported products is implicit in Lucio’s curiosity about the origin of my cap. It reveals the widespread cultural reverence for products made in

foreign lands, especially in the United States, which is commonly seen in the Brazilian pop culture as the center of material production and consumption. The adoration for American products, among which Nike stands as the epitome for the Brazilian youth, reflects the colonial mentality that circulates in the dominant culture; that is, if it is American, it must be of better quality, superior. Where do street kids “get” this knowledge from? Given that they have not experienced the American culture firsthand, the global communication strategies that coconstruct social realities at the turn of the century seem to be a likely source of such knowledge.

These kids’ concern for the origin of products makes the issue of authenticity relevant. The authentic is not available to everyone, not only in terms of price tags but also because only a selected few have access to the places where the authentic can be found. Thus, imitation products, often made without the craft of the original but with similar enough features, are put out in the market to satisfy the consuming desires for the symbols of status of the masses indoctrinated (exploited) by consumerism. Imitations, then, become an attractive alternative at both ends of the consumption schema, for it brings profits to producers at the same time that it allows the less economically privileged to own and display symbols of status. It is not surprising, therefore, that mechanisms of identification have been developed in a market saturated with authentic and imitation products. Lucio’s (and other street kids’) ability to accurately differentiate an imported, authentic cap from an imitation cap is an instantiation of such mechanisms. Even without being able to purchase either, Lucio knew of the competition in the market between authentic and imitation Nike caps. Furthermore, along with other street kids, Lucio was able to separate the two types of products, by knowing, as an expert in arts would, the subtle characteristics of the authentic.

This attention to consumption and authenticity reflects the street kids’ assimilation in the culture of consumption, a space dominated by the powerful wealthy minority of Brazil. Paulo Freire’s (1970) seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, offers a pertinent theoretical framework for discussing this matter. The duality of the oppressed refers to the internalization by the marginalized of the dominant group’s values and beliefs, especially those alluding to the opinion of the oppressors about them (the oppressed). According to Freire, this internalization occurs mainly through processes such as a “banking” concept of education and “false generosity.” The “banking” education refers to the act carried out by teachers and other significant adults who deposit information (the received knowledge) into the children’s minds, who in turn have little choice but to patiently receive, memorize, and repeat it. As Freire puts it,

in the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the

ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as process of inquiry.
(p. 53)⁴

As a result, the oppressed experience life with the oppressor's mentality "housed" inside them, creating internal contradictions and conflicts. At the same time that they loathe the oppressors, the oppressed want to be like them ("be like Mike"), have what they have (Nikes), and experience what they experience (acknowledgement of self-worth through material possessions). The oppressed, then, are more inclined to focus on the duality of being and nothingness rather than on the more liberating frontier between being oppressed and being more human.

This process of internalization of inferiority also occurs through "false generosity," which is the elite's practice of occasionally giving minute parts of their possessions (including time) to the less privileged. This practice reinscribes the dominant group's worldview about the essentially materialistic concept of existence, to which the economically oppressed, obviously, have little or no access. The result is that the oppressed receive nothing more than "things." And "things," objects, cannot replace subjective notions of humanity, the calling of all human beings (Freire, 1970). According to Freire, true generosity is based on dialogic communication between subjects and not between subjects and objects, as most often happens between the elitist charity and street kids. Indeed, false generosity may be even more harmful when undertaken with the best of intentions, for it, through an emotional path, reinforces the notion that lack of humanization can be compensated by material possessions, thus putting a price, so to speak, on solidarity and alliance. My own unwitting complicity in what Freire calls false generosity is represented in the episode that follows.

"Unaffordable" Nikes

My first fieldwork trip was ending. I was about to leave the streets of Campinas and return to graduate school in the United States. I found Danilo, a daring 14-year-old adolescent who was seen by the kids as the leader of the group, sitting alone on the gas station corner. I asked him what he would do with a pair of Nike shoes. I was thinking about giving him my own Nikes as a way of thanking him for having shared with me so much of his life on the streets of Campinas.

"I'd sell them to buy stuff," he said, smiling at me.

After having seen him almost every day for 2 months, I knew that "stuff" didn't mean food.

"Why would you sell it instead of keeping it for yourself?" I asked.

"It would get stolen soon. I could even get killed just because of some stupid shoes," Danilo said. "Haven't you heard about that kid who got killed because he didn't want to give his Nike shoes to those fuckin' crooks?"

Yes, I had heard about it. But I didn't say anything. I wasn't going to give Danilo my shoes anymore.

That made me think of Lucio again. A few days before, I'd offered him the same cap I had on the first time we met. I'd gotten close to him and wanted to give him a gift before I left. He'd once told me he liked to wear caps, though I never saw him with one. I decided to give him my "imported" Nike cap.

"No thanks," Lucio said when I offered it to him.

"Why?" I asked, at the same time surprised and a bit indignant.

"It'd get stolen right away," he paused for a moment. "The other imported cap I had was stolen on the first day, while I was sleeping," he said with a shrug.

I put the cap back on, suddenly feeling the intractable distance between our worlds materializing right there between us.

Naively, I had not thought of the troubles my Nike gifts could bring to the kids. Despite their desire to own and wear Nike products, they had learned from experience (as in Lucio's case) and stories (as in Danilo's case) that they could not afford to keep these products without endangering their physical well-being. The street kids' living conditions, marked by the lack of safe and permanent shelter, caretaking adults, and constant exposure to the violence in the streets, make it impossible for them to taste the consuming dreams of the dominant culture even when the financial hurdle is overcome. It is likely that this situation further magnifies the street kids' perceptions of their marginal existence in society, reinforcing a (subliminal) notion that they are lesser human beings.

Also in this latter episode, my own agency in the perpetuation of consumerism and a materialist existence becomes evident by my well-intentioned "false generosity"—namely, my impulsive, initial desire to show gratitude by giving the kids Nike products they seemed to crave. This attitude underscores my own complicity in the same culture of consumption that further dehumanizes these children and adolescents living in the streets. Even as a well-intentioned researcher, armed with ideals of empowerment, I unwittingly helped perpetuate the materialistic ontology that tends to treat marginalized groups, such as street kids, as objects instead of subjects. To be sure, it is in small, short, superficial interactions that we, the more privileged, contribute to the street kids' sense of inferiority. I do not know whether, or how, my materialistic gesture toward Lucio affected his perception of himself. Did he feel inferior for not being able to use a symbol I could sport without a thought about personal safety? Did he think I was clueless about life in the streets for having offered him my Nike cap? I will never know. He was found dead, shot in the head, a few years after the encounter I describe here. He was dead at 17.

However, even if this small incident had no major effects on Lucio's perception of self, it most likely added to the many daily encounters that objectify the street kids either as recipients of charity or as criminal newsmakers. The vast majority of these kids are teenagers and, thus, experiencing a crucial developmental phase of their lives while being called pickpockets, no-goods, filthy; seeing themselves represented in the media only as dirty drug addicts and thieves; seeing people turn their eyes away and holding their purses tighter when paths are crossed; being ignored by drivers as they knock on car windows; seeing people shut their doors and windows as they approach; hearing mothers and fathers tell their young children not to look at them; being offered gifts they cannot keep. This, and much worse, is all happening as they are developing a sense of selfhood, of identity. Who am I? Who will I become? Who can I become? In this stage of development, when identity is entirely informed by others' views and opinions about a person (Erikson, 1968; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), street kids cannot help but fill up their eyes and ears and hearts with the contempt coming from all corners of society (Diversi, 1998a; Diversi, Moraes Filho, & Morelli, 1999).

According to Richardson's (1990) notion of collective stories and the formation of subjective identity, mentioned earlier in the article, these kids are limited to giving meaning to their experiences based on the mainstream view of reality presented by the dominant cultural discourse, that is, the dependence of identity on the Western ideals of material possession and accumulation, the attachment of selfhood to "having," to owning and displaying symbols of status and success. This hegemonic narrative of reality and existence gives little space for street kids to become active agents in transforming their lives toward fuller humanization (for no one can transform her or his life without the belief in alternative cultural plots). Resistance, self-redefinition, and consequent empowerment, both at the individual and collective levels, must be founded on alternative narratives of liberation (Collins, 1991), on narratives that transcend the passive accommodation to the normalized present and offer the possibility for the continuing transformation of reality, on narratives that reject the static, stubbornly immutable portrait of reality imposed by the dominant social groups to maintain order and, thus, domination.⁵ As Furter's (1966) dialectical view suggests, "the universe is revealed not as space, imposing a massive presence to which I can but adapt, but as a scope, a domain which takes shape as I act upon it" (pp. 26-27). These Nike street kids are acting on the scope of their universe by showing off knowledge about the dominant culture of consumption. But they are made sharply aware of the limitations to their fuller participation in the shaping of their human scope (Diversi, 1998b).

The sophisticated knowledge of the culture of consumption instantiated by the street kids in the "Nike episodes" suggests an understanding of the social values and beliefs of their cultural context. It shows their ability to understand the symbols, such as Nike, considered highly desirable by the dominant culture (of consumption). Perhaps these kids have far more elaborated techniques to

assess the authenticity of Nike products than the targeted consumer, for instance. All this knowledge and perception can be interpreted as the street kids' attention to the "normal," idealized society, as an attempt to become part of it, as a desire to be perceived as full human beings. And so, new narratives and collective stories could be coconstructed with the street kids, reinventing the self by acknowledging what makes them just as human as those who negate them: the understanding of cultural values, the desire for symbols of power and status, a materialistic ontology, and most important, the desire for public acknowledgement of their human condition.

However, the population and institutions serving the kids, with the superior gaze characteristic of the charitable, can rarely see past the stereotypes throbbing in the cultural imagination. Instead, attention is mainly focused on the infractions and so-called deviant acts committed by the street kids. Their identities are fixed as minicriminals, outcasts who have a natural inclination to disrespect the laws, a knack for taking money from the handicapped and old ladies. This lack of understanding and conformity to the ways of decent folks, projected onto the street kids by people too numbed by unexamined preconceptions to engage in true dialogue, further demonizes the kids in the cultural imagination. Once dehumanized and locked into an inferior category of being, harassment in all forms can, and does, take place with (silent) support from the population.

As long as the dominant discourse inscribes street kids as being "nothing but little criminals," any effort toward empowerment through redefinition, reinvention of selfhood, or reinterpretation of lived experiences would terribly fail. My fieldwork experience in Campinas has made me realize, in scandalous ways, the romanticized notions of empowerment I first carried into this ethnographic project. How could street kids believe they can be more than just "little criminals" when they are treated as little criminals so many times a day? How can they believe that they are not inherently vicious when they are treated with hatred by the population and with violence by the police? How can they try to become fuller human beings, as I naively thought at first, when they are often treated as inferior even by those who want to help? At best, it is irresponsible to expect that kids in such obscene health, social, and economic conditions overcome their predicament alone. To redefine the self, to reject the prescribed self-image and learn to respect and admire oneself not for what one is not (lacking the symbols associated with high social status) but for what one is requires social encounters that create conditions for positive feedback and support. Thus, the importance of sensitizing the population to the street children's condition in the hopes that new and more liberating cultural plots be laid out as alternatives.

After all, these kids are not much different from the well-to-do citizens when we look beyond superficial external characteristics. Most of us share, to some degree, a hunger for materialistic consumption, for the authentic, for symbols and commodities that project the images associated with the current standards

of success. Just Do It! The street kids' dreams of commodities are only different from ours in that they do not take place in comfortable mattresses, automatic cars, jet planes, or climate-controlled rooms. As superficial as these desires may be, in the end, I dare say we are all looking for the same things: acceptance, acknowledgement, respect, and self-worth. Humanization. In their desperate search, the kids observe, learn, and master the web of symbols that seem to make one "more human" before society's eyes. Although well-to-do citizens might view these kids' desire of Nikes as yet another expression of incorrigible stupidity ("The poor devils don't even have food, for Christ's sake!"), for the kids, understanding the meanings of these symbols, the symbols of the "more human," may be an unconscious way of pursuing appraisal, recognition, and acknowledgement so scarce in their street life. Perhaps beneath the desire for Nikes, there lies a most human desire for life with dignity.

Notes

1. I use the term *street kid* instead of the more commonly used *street children* in an attempt to replace the sense of innocence and vulnerability associated with the word *children* with a sense of resistance and counterculture. I use it with respect and admiration for their resilience and healthy mischievousness. I also prefer the term *kids* because it seems more inclusive of the teenage years than does *children*. The street kids I am referring to in this article spent most of their time in the streets, with occasional visits to their relatives or institutions. Only one had recently been attending school (he dropped out during the time of my research), and all had been living on and off the streets for a few years.

2. The critique here is not theological or against the particular churches working with street kids in Brazil but toward a society that has allowed its government to neglect many of the children and adolescents born in the country. Needless to say, there are numerous successful nongovernmental organizations conducting precious interventions, but they represent isolated efforts. Many street kids are unable to adjust to or simply reject the available religious programs, a rejection that is a civil right of any citizen. As a person needs a physician when they are faced with cancer, street kids need help from professionals trained in the available knowledge of the disciplines related to human development and health so they can increase their chances to (re)enter the larger society and not just religious groups.

3. Nike is a corporation operating in a capitalist system that has made its existence and success possible in the first place. A critique of the Nike Corporation without an examination of the cultural fabric sustaining its success would be naive and fruitless. It is not my intention to portray the Nike Corporation as evil or oppressive in and of itself. Instead, I have intended to use the kids' desire for, and knowledge of, Nike products as a window into the world of consumption and its dehumanizing forces on the masses existing at the margins of (post)modern society.

4. One of the frequent criticisms of the academic discussion about oppression is that it speaks as if there exists a group of White, wealthy males who sit together to determine the dominant values, beliefs, and social norms, which they will spread around institutions such as the family, the workplace, the school, and the community. That is a mistaken and naive interpretation of the cultural studies' rhetoric about oppression. The oppressive "status quo," or the oppressive "dominant discourse," does not have a consciousness of its own that would allow it to act on the social world independent of human existence. Rather, it is maintained, perpetuated, challenged, changed by the dialogical interaction of individual and collective consciousness. In other words, the status quo, for instance, is maintained (as well as challenged) by the dialogical interaction of people who both affect and are affected by it. That means that those who are oppressed also contribute to the maintenance of the status quo as long as they carry the oppressor's mentality "housed" within themselves (Freire, 1970). But most significant, I believe, is the fact that even though physically disembodied, the status quo and the dominant discourse, as mechanisms of oppression, do affect people; they do affect subjectivity, touching emotions and feelings. Thus, even though oppression does not have an independent consciousness, it must be acknowledged and criticized to reduce its socializing reach.

5. Of use to this point is Gramsci's concept of ideological hegemony, which posits that the dominant classes create and perpetuate social systems that emphasize the need for social order, authority, and discipline to legitimate its power. Also useful is Lukacs's concept of subscription, which argues that although the social world is created by people's everyday actions, these actions and their outcomes are perceived as independent of human agency, as objectified "things."

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Marcelo Diversi is currently an independent scholar doing research on and writing about immigrant youth in the United States from a cultural studies/developmental perspective. His present focus is on the development of identity in our current multicultural society, with specific attention to the struggle of making sense of the self while negotiating the intersections and clashes between mainstream American culture and culture of origin.