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Approaching Youth in Anthropology

Editors' Note

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This introduction was supposed to have begun with a clever epitaph about “youth,” but we could not find one. All of the bons mots we found on the web are actually about being older and claiming that it is only after youth that one can recognize what it really is—wasted on the young (George Bernard Shaw), a form of chemical madness (F. Scott Fitzgerald), and so on.

The singer and songwriter Patti Smith asks: “Who can know the heart of youth but youth itself?” Is it too much to suggest that *anthropologists* might? The pleasures and problems of youth have preoccupied poets, philosophers, and people of all ages, and also inspired a vibrant area of study in anthropology that is relevant and meaningful for us to learn from and teach. Indeed, if the concerns of youth belong to us all, then now seems an especially urgent time to concern ourselves with youth, who have been highly visible in recent movements for political and economic change, migrations within and across borders, and moments of crisis and resolution.

Elisa Sobo, in her 2015 *Reviews in Anthropology* piece, “[Anthropological Contributions and Challenges to the Study of Children and Childhoods](#),” describes studies of children and youth as currently experiencing a major growth spurt across the four fields of anthropology. She traces a long history of disciplinary interest and the defining and redefining of the terms in which we understand children and youth and what and who they are. In the past, an interest in children and youths had been rooted in an understanding of childhood and youth as the ages and stages of human development that culminated in the psychological and social maturity of adulthood. In fact, Sobo reminds us that Edward Tylor, in the late 19th century, equated this apparent progression from childhood to adulthood with then prevailing ideas about humankind’s progress from savagery to civilization and contended that “the savage [is] a representative of the childhood of the human race” (45). Later, for Franz Boas and his students of the mid 20th century, childhood represented plasticity, both physical and psychological, and youth especially came to be understood as a period of change, vulnerability, and upheaval.

From the perspective of biological anthropology, childhood and adolescence distinguish humans from other primates and highly social mammals, [Barry Bogin](#) explains in his 1997 article, [Evolutionary](#)

[Hypotheses for Human Childhood](#). Bogin's piece was published in the Yearbook of Physical Anthropology, an annual supplement to the [American Journal of Physical Anthropology](#), published by the [American Association of Physical Anthropologists](#). "The majority of mammals progress from infancy to adulthood seamlessly, without any intervening stages, and while their growth rates are in decline" (72). Not so with humans, whose rate of growth, feeding, and reproductive behavior can be described as changing across five stages: infancy, childhood, juvenility, adolescence, and adulthood. Other mammals approach puberty almost full grown, but for humans, "the onset of adolescence is marked by a sudden and rapid increase in growth rate which peaks at a level unequaled since early infancy" (73).

Looking for children and youth in the archaeological record has prompted archaeologists to consider not only what they might find, but also how to interpret it, broadening both the sources and analysis of data. [Megan A. Perry](#), in her 2005 [Redefining Childhood through Biorarchaeology: Toward an Archaeological and Biological Understanding of Children in Antiquity](#), observes that bioarchaeologists can identify the skeletons of "subadults" or individuals under age 18 in a sample, but ought not consider them all "children." Rather, she suggests that researchers "should consider how accurately their age categories reflect reality within a particular cultural or temporal context. Critically engaging these biological data with material cultural, textual, and ethnohistorical evidence allows archaeologists to better understand the role of children in ancient societies" (90). Perry's piece is featured in the [Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association](#) special issue, [Children in Action: Perspective on the Archaeology of Childhoods](#).

In cultural anthropology, youth and youths were defined specifically as adolescence and adolescents and, as Mary Bucholtz notes in her 2002 *Annual Review of Anthropology* article, "[Youth and Cultural Practice](#)," the focus in anthropology has been on initiation ceremonies, sexual practices, courtship and marital customs, intergenerational relations, and the transition to adulthood. While this framing of young people as almost-adults has hindered an acknowledgement of the ways in which youth and youths become made and identified socially and culturally, Bucholtz suggests that "shifts both in the discipline and in the world's cultures have expanded the range of anthropological inquiry, and as a result the field has seen more investigation of youth cultural practices" (525) and describes anthropology as "particularly well situated to offer an account of how young people around the world produce and negotiate cultural forms" (526).

Such a movement toward recognizing youth as the participants and observers of the cultures that they claim, reject, and remake on their own terms is evident in the 12 articles and 3 book reviews presented here, which feature selections from the early and middle of the 20th century in addition to more recent works. The topics considered in these articles include political engagement, economic and educational opportunities (or the lack thereof), gender, sexuality, rites of passage and ritual, culture change, consumption, popular culture, language, intergenerational conflict, and place and space. We cannot claim that this collection, culled from the publications of the American Anthropological Association, is in any way definitive of the active field of study on youth. Our aim in bringing together these works is to provide starting points for approaching and engaging youth in anthropology.

The Presence and Past of Youth in Anthropology

This issue opens with selections that highlight the directions that the anthropology of youth has taken in recent years and connects (and contrasts) them with the approaches of the past. Today, anthropologists are

as interested in problematizing the concept and category of youth as they are in the problems of youth and in problem youth.

The first two works are drawn from a slate of articles on youth that were published in 2004 in [American Ethnologist](#), the journal of the [American Ethnological Society](#) (AES).

In the first selection, “Disappearing Youth: Youth as a Social Shifter in Botswana,” [Deborah Durham](#) discusses the ways in which youth are talked about and what and who youth is understood to be in moments of social crises. Durham introduces the linguistic concept of the “shifter”—an expression that “can only be understood in the context of a particular use, as its meaning shifts with each use” (592), like the pronouns I and you—and suggests that “youth” operates as a shifter in social and political discourses, positioning an individual identified as youth “in terms of a variety of social attributes, including not only age but also independence-dependence, authority, rights, abilities knowledge, responsibilities, and so on” (593). A particular focus here is on the demonstrations that were sparked by the disappearance and murder of a 14 year old girl in Botswana in 1995. Although the demonstrations quickly became depicted in the media as “youth riots,” the participants also included “villagers” and older people who aired a range of other complaints having to do with village life versus city life, small business, and joblessness. In the years since the demonstrations, the murdered girl’s name has become a rallying cry for others who “have positioned themselves in an ambiguous, shifting terrain of childhood and youth, shaped by claims to act on behalf of others, to care for others, and the claim care themselves, in households and in nations” (600).

In the second article, “Fresh Contact in Tamatave, Madagascar: Sex, Money, and Intergenerational Transformation,” [Jennifer Cole](#) considers the questions of youth, culture, and agency that are raised by young women’s engagement in transactional sex with European tourists from whom they receive (or hope to receive) money, gifts, and other promises, including the opportunity to migrate. While their activities can be understood locally as youthful experimentation—for which there is a longstanding acceptance—Cole suggests that they also ought to be considered in terms of the contemporary political and economic conditions in which young women and men make their lives in Madagascar, noting “because contemporary social and economic conditions have made normative paths to adulthood either irrelevant or impossible to traverse, transactional sex is intimately tied to processes of intergenerational transformation” (574). Cole finds that the path from youthful “searching” to proper adulthood through marriage and household formation is no longer perceived as a clear, viable, or even desirable one. Her analysis demonstrates why not to take youthful practice like sexual experimentation for granted as a behavior or phase that young people inevitably pass through, but to examine it thoughtfully and thoroughly within its particular historical moment.

A line can be drawn directly from Cole’s account of young women in Madagascar to Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*, arguably one of the most famous works in anthropology and a founding text in the study of youth. Our third selection is this 1929 book review of *Coming of Age in Samoa* (with its subtitle, *A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization*), which appeared in [American Anthropologist](#). In it, [Robert Lowie](#) both acknowledges the importance of Mead’s work and avows his skepticism about some of her claims—“It is hard to understand how certain conclusions could have been arrived at” (534)—presaging later controversies about her findings. Rather than write a general descriptive account of Samoan culture, Mead concentrates her interest on Samoan youth and considers a question of particular relevance for her intended readers in the United States. She contends the “storm and stress” that vex adolescents in their passage from youth to adulthood in the United States were not necessarily observed among the young women whom she came to know in Samoa, which she attributes to

the differences between their societies. However, Lowie points to Mead's own notes in the book's appendix, in which she acknowledges the significance of culture change in the acceptance of youthful sexual behaviors: "Present-day Samoan civilization is simply the result of the fortuitous and on the whole fortunate impetus of a complex, intrusive culture upon a simpler and most hospitable indigenous one" (532).

Decades later, the storm and stress of youth and of culture change are the focus of [Thomas W. McDade's](#) 2002 study, "Status Incongruity in Samoan Youth: A Biocultural Analysis of Culture Change, Stress and Immune Function." The piece appeared in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, the journal of the [Society for Medical Anthropology](#). In it, McDade examines what he calls status incongruity that results from the changes associated with markers of social status in Samoa—in particular, the prestige and privilege that had been associated with the matai (chief) title and the increasing importance of material goods, ideas, and experiences associated with the U.S., New Zealand, and the "West." To this end, he combines biological and cultural methods to measure the effects of the stress of culture change among Samoan adolescents. Blood samples were tested for levels of antibodies against the Epstein-Barr virus, which have been shown to be a reliable marker of psychosocial experience and immune function. The adolescents from whom the samples had been taken also were interviewed. McDade finds the highest biomarker levels in young people with the highest incongruities—that is, individuals with no matai presence and high Western experience or with high matai presence and low Western experience. "Rather than rejecting the matai system as outdated or superfluous, individuals with a high degree of success in the relatively Western world appear to be embracing this more traditional avenue of social status and using it to their advantage," McDade suggests. "This underscores the point that both markers of social status remain important, and that the process of culture change in Samoa is not one of replacement but of negotiation and integration" (142)

Making and Remaking Youth Identity and Culture

Ritual, intergenerational conflict, and identity have been central concerns in anthropological studies of youth. In the mid 20th century, these topics were approached in terms of psychological development, as illustrated in [Yehudi Cohen's](#) 1964 *American Anthropologist* article, "The Establishment of Identity in a Social Nexus: The Special Case of Initiation Ceremonies and Their Relation to Value and Legal Systems." Cohen, who died in 1998, was the author of *The Transition from Childhood to Adolescence: Cross Cultural Studies of Initiation Ceremonies, Legal Systems and Incest Taboos* (1964). Here, Cohen argues against a Freudian interpretation of male puberty ceremonies as attempts to separate boys from dependence on their mothers and establish identification with their fathers. Drawing on ethnographic data on 44 culture groups, Cohen undertakes statistical analyses to test a series of claims about the relationships between initiation rites, avoidance of the opposite sex, and the organization of descent groups and legal systems. He suggests that rather than there being a pivotal moment, such as the initiation rites, the goals and values of a society "begin to be realized within the society even before the first stage of puberty" (548) or the transition from childhood to puberty.

The continuities and shifts in approaches to the study of youth are especially apparent in psychological anthropology, which has been concerned with the continuities and shifts that youth themselves negotiate in their everyday lives. In "Trials of Navajo Youth: Identity, Healing, and the Struggle for Maturity" (2003), [Christopher Dole](#) and [Thomas J. Csordas](#) discuss the experiences of young Navajo women and men, who traverse between two complex social worlds on and off-reservation and daily navigate "a dramatic reordering of social relations, the increasing rarity of contact with people who live traditional

Navajo lives, a heightened sense of longing for an authentic life, and the bleak economic future they see reservation life preparing them for” (377). Like the Samoan youth in McDade’s study, the Navajo youth in this article are caught in the storm and stress of coming into their own as individuals whose sense of self is inextricable from a cultural identity itself in transition. Dole and Csordas explore the intriguing possibilities for connectedness that ritual healing practices might offer “in addressing the intersecting sentiments of personal isolation and cultural disconnect” (377), but remain mindful of the conditions of the broader social world that so frequently undermine such attempts. This piece was published in *Ethos*, the journal of the **Society for Psychological Anthropology**.

In “The Rise of the Leisure Class: Adolescence and Recreational Acculturation in the Canadian Arctic,” [Richard Condon](#) considers the impacts of social and economic transformations in Inuit communities on the experiences of youth. Condon, a noted scholar in Arctic studies, died in 1995 in a boat accident on the Bering Sea that also claimed the lives of several American, Russian, and Yupik colleagues. In this article, published in *Ethos*’ 1995 [special issue on adolescence](#), Condon notes an expansion in time and opportunities for “leisure” thanks to a higher degree of economic security in addition to a delay in assuming the responsibilities of adulthood due to a high rate of unemployment. It is in the context of an extended time of adolescence or youth in which he describes young Inuit men engaged in a range of expressive activities that have been introduced relatively recently. Condon discusses what he calls recreational acculturation, in which “not only are young Inuit playing the very non-Inuit games of hockey, basketball, baseball, volleyball, and so on, but they are increasingly playing these games in a remarkably un-Inuit manner, with heavy emphasis on overt competition, explicit ranking, and physical confrontation” (48).

The feelings that one either has a surplus of time to pass or has been passed by time already and that time is passing either too slowly or too quickly are shared among the young men who are the subjects of [Craig Jeffrey’s](#) “Timepass: Youth, Class, and Time among Unemployed Young Men in India,” published in *American Ethnologist* in 2010. Based on ethnographic research conducted in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, Jeffrey considers what “timepass” signifies for these young men, who are educated and unemployed. On the one hand, passing time together engenders youthful solidarity among them, which crosses class and caste lines, albeit only temporarily. On the other hand, “timepass” as a youth cultural practice reflects “the disappointment of being unable to acquire secure salaried work despite having spent a long time in formal education, the frustration of being unable to travel and start a family in the manner of a ‘successful man,’ and the sense of loss that accompanies being removed from spaces associated with modernity and development” (477).

The next selection brings our attention from the anxieties of young people themselves to the anxieties about youths—and the changes that they both represent and create in cultural life—that are held and discussed among adults. In “Those Naughty Teenage Girls: Japanese Kogals, Slang, and Media Assessments,” [Laura Miller](#) considers both the discourses surrounding young Japanese women identified as *Kogals* and the distinctive linguistic practices that are associated with this youth subculture. The 2004 article was published by the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, the journal of the [Society for Linguistic Anthropology](#). Miller describes *Kogal* fashion as suprahistorical syncretisms incorporating contemporary African-American hip hop and 1970s white British punk, among other influences. Given that teenage girls dominate the market for cell phones in Japan, it is not surprising that *Kogals* have been credited with the invention of a text message code and a lexicon of emoticons that Miller describes as far more extensive and complex than those used among U.S. teens. However, it is the unconventional speech of *Kogals*—including “the use of nonstandard forms, novel coinages, and explicit reference to sexual or taboo topics”

(231)—which has prompted older people to that complain youths no longer know how to speak proper Japanese and that they are destroying the language. Miller suggests “mainstream disapproval of *Kogals* reflects more than customary intergenerational scorn. Understanding media images of *Kogals* is important because through them we apprehend the public response to the critical role of women in sustaining capitalist consumerism, and to women’s struggles for autonomy and independence” (242).

The opposition of authorities to youth culture and their attempt to intervene are part of the back story of [Fred C. Blake’s](#) 1979 *American Ethnologist* article, “Love Songs and the Great Leap: The Role of Youth Culture in the Revolutionary Phase of China’s Economic Development.” This piece considers the inclusion of a collection of love songs in a Communist Party-sponsored songbook. While the lyrics evoke the idiom and metaphors of youthful courtship, they have been composed to communicate the party’s ideals and values to the young people who are supposed to sing and listen to the songs. The songbook itself represents the Communist government’s recognition of the significance of popular culture and its attempt to rewrite youth culture, especially what the party deemed “bad” songs. These featured lyrics that were labeled “dissipating,” “erotic,” and “obscene”—for example, one Communist music critic complained of such a song: “It tells us nothing more than how she loves his eyes, desires to marry, wants to have children, and how her face turns red” (49). Yet, Blake notes that young people continued to circulate the purely popular “bad” songs, even hand copying entire volumes of their lyrics and performing them in public singing competitions.

The Places and Space of Youth

While consumption, popular culture, and youthful rebellion and resistance have been constant themes in anthropological studies of youth, scholars more recently have been calling attention to the significance of place and space in the experiences of young people. It is not only that the particularity of places and spaces matter ever more, not less, in the experiences of globalization, but that the actions and interactions of young people mark and make the landscapes they inhabit. In “Youth Cosmopolitanism: Clothing, the City and Globalization in Dakar, Senegal,” [Suzanne Scheld](#) describes a city that is plagued with high unemployment and poverty, but also youthful, with about 65 percent of the population is under 30 years old. As adults are unable to make a living and provide for their children, young people establish and maintain networks through which they provision for themselves and buy, sell, and trade clothing. “Yet youth are not celebrated for their contributions to the city. It is common to hear adults say in Wolof, the lingua franca of Senegal, ‘*xale tey danu nak djoum*’—today’s youth are thoughtless and lack self-respect, ambition, vision, and courage” (235). Scheld acknowledges that at times, young people “lie, steal and hurt other people in order to reach their goals” (236), but observes that their participation in an informal economy overall is vital not only to their own lives, but to the life of the city. The article was featured originally in a 2007 special issue on “[Youth Engage the City and Global Culture](#)” of [City & Society](#), the journal of the [Society for Urban, National, and Transnational / Global Anthropology](#).

How youth actively construct a sense of place by drawing on popular culture as a resource that is both meaningful and accessible to them is considered in “In the Clique”: Popular Culture, Construction of Place, and the Everyday Lives of Urban Youth by [Greg Dimitriadis](#) (1969-2014), who was a well-respected scholar, professor, and associate dean for academic affairs at the University of Buffalo Graduate School of Education. This 2001 article illustrates his interests in urban education, popular culture, and educational policy that serves disenfranchised urban youth. It was published in [Anthropology & Education Quarterly](#), the journal of the [Council on Anthropology and Education](#). In it, Dimitriadis describes the friendship of two African American teens living in the Midwest, but recalling and enacting

shared ties with the South. For these young men, the South is remembered and imagined in terms of family, community, and respect, “a site where such communal values are privileged, a place that forces people, due to rampant racism, to stick together and look out for one another” (40). How these teens maintain their sense of the South is through their taste in rap music, which Dimitriadis notes is known for its notions of place, with artists identified as East Coast, West Coast, and the South. Many have argued that this kind of community has been lost to an out-of-control generation of black youth—most often symbolized by and through rap music. Yet we see here that these teens attempted to create a kind cultural continuity through these self-same popular resources” (48-49).

In “Making Their Way: Four Books on Youth, Culture, and Identity,” a 2000 review essay published in *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, [Roslyn Arlin Mickelson](#) observes that “a fundamental precept of contemporary teaching and teacher education is to begin ‘where the students are,’ although we rarely have a solid sense of where ‘that’ is” (381). The four books reviewed here include three studies of youth culture and identity in North America and one ethnography of street children in northeastern Brazil, which attempt to document where these youths see themselves. They are [Peer Power: Preadolescent Culture and Identity](#) by [Patricia A. Adler](#) and [Peter A. Adler](#); [Angels’ Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday](#) by [Ralph Cintron](#); [Everyday Courage: The Lives and Stories of Urban Teenagers](#) by [Niobe Way](#); and [At Home in the Street: Street Children of Northeast Brazil](#) by [Tobias Hecht](#), which received the 2002 [Margaret Mead Award](#).

Both schools and prisons are the spaces and places that shape the life chances and lived experiences of youth of color in the U.S. today, as [Michelle Fine](#) and [Jessica Ruglis](#) remind us in “Circuits and Consequences of Dispossession: The Racialized Realignment of the Public Sphere for U.S. Youth,” their 2009 article published in *Transforming Anthropology*, the journal of the [Association of Black Anthropologists](#). This piece examines the particularities of how Black, Latino, immigrant and/or poor students become actively disadvantaged and dispossessed of educational opportunities, drawing from ethnographic and archival research used to prepare for expert testimony in a class action lawsuit brought against a California school district based on its failure to provide an adequate educate to its students. The students, who are primarily Latino or Black, have keen awareness not only of the problems in their schools, but also that they are being systematically shortchanged, as is clear from the quotes taken from transcripts of their focus group interviews. “It make you feel less about yourself, you know, like you sitting here in a class where you have to stand up because there’s not enough chairs and you see rats in the buildings,” one student tells the researchers. “And that just makes me feel less real about myself because it’s like the State don’t care about public schools” (25).

Contending with marginality and invisibility in the broader public space is an experience documented also in [Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America](#) by [Mary Gray](#), which is discussed in [C. Todd White’s](#) 2010 book review in *American Anthropologist*. The book describes the experiences of LGBT-identifying youth in rural Kentucky and their attempts to claim a place for themselves in their hometowns and schools while they also participate in “imagined queer communities” made accessible through social media. The book, which received the 2009 Ruth Benedict Award from the [Association for Queer Anthropology](#), is recommended as reading for advanced undergraduate courses.

In sum, this collection of articles demonstrates the range of approaches and insight that anthropology can provide on the promises and disappointments of young people. Indeed, youth is having its moment in anthropology at a time when an anthropological perspective on youth—one that takes into account their abilities and inabilities to act and react—seems especially important and necessary.

For those of us whose interest in the anthropology of youth has been provoked, an invaluable resource for teaching and further study is the [Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group](#).

In addition, we recommend *Cultural Anthropology's* 2009 [Curated Collection on Youth](#), which features 5 articles published in the journal between 2002 and 2009 and a commentary and conversation with the authors. *Cultural Anthropology* is the open access journal of the [Society for Cultural Anthropology](#).

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[Disappearing Youth: Youth as a Social Shifter in Botswana](#)

Deborah Durham – *American Ethnologist*.. Vol 31, Issue 4: 589-605 (2004)

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[Fresh Contact in Tamatave, Madagascar: Sex, Money, and Intergenerational Transformation](#)

Jennifer Cole – *American Ethnologist*.. Vol 31, Issue 4: 573-588 (2004)

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[Book Review: Coming of Age in Samoa. A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation. Margaret Mead. Foreword by Franz Boas](#)

Robert H. Lowie – *American Anthropologist*.. Vol 31, Issue 3: 532-534 (1929)

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[Status Incongruity in Samoan Youth: A Biocultural Analysis of Culture Change, Stress and Immune Function](#)

Thomas W. McDade – *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*.. Vol 16, Issue 2: 123-150 (2002)

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[The Establishment of Identity in a Social Nexus: The Special Case of Initiation Ceremonies and Their Relation to Value and Legal Systems](#)

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[Trials of Navajo Youth: Identity, Healing, and the Struggle for Maturity](#)

Christopher Dole and Thomas J. Csordas – *Ethos*.. Vol 31, Issue 3: 357-384 (2003)

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[The Rise of the Leisure Class: Adolescence and Recreational Acculturation in the Canadian Arctic](#)

Richard Condon – *Ethos*.. Vol 23, Issue 1: 47-68 (1995)

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[Timepass: Youth, Class, and Time among Unemployed Young Men in India](#)

Craig Jeffrey – *American Ethnologist*.. Vol 37, Issue 3: 465-481 (2010)

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[Those Naughty Teenage Girls: Japanese Kogals, Slang, and Media Assessments](#)

Laura Miller – *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*.. Vol 14, Issue 2: 225-247 (2004)

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[Love Songs and the Great Leap: The Role of Youth Culture in the Revolutionary Phase of China's Economic Development](#)

Fred C. Blake – *American Ethnologist*.. Vol 6, Issue 1: 41-54 (1979)

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[Youth Cosmopolitanism: Clothing, the City and Globalization in Dakar, Senegal](#)

Suzanne Scheld – *City & Society*.. Vol 19, Issue 2: 232-253 (2007)

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[“In the Clique”: Popular Culture, Construction of Place, and the Everyday Lives of Urban Youth](#)

Greg Dimitriadis – *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*.. Vol 32, Issue 1: 29-51 (2001)

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[Book Review: Making Their Way: Four Books on Youth, Culture, and Identity](#)

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[Circuits and Consequences of Dispossession: The Racialized Realignment of the Public Sphere for U.S. Youth](#)

Michelle Fine and Jessica Ruglis – *Transforming Anthropology*.. Vol 17, Issue 1: 20-33 (2009)

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[Book Review: Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America by Mary Gray](#)

C. Todd White – *American Anthropologist*.. Vol 112, Issue 3: 482-483 (2010)

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