I.D.ology and the technologies of public (school) space: an ethnographic inquiry into the neo-liberal tactics of social (re)production

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This paper explores spatial theory, and particularly a Foucauldian analysis of space, power, and the subject, as a frame within which to examine moves toward security in North American urban schools. We bring into play empirical data from an ethnographic study of New York City and Toronto schools where policies and technologies of record-keeping, identification-verifying, and spatial arrangements are producing altered experiences of subjectivity and the ways in which youth, workers, and researchers experience public (school) space. What is possible to know in ethnographic studies of these new high-security school sites? We argue that notions of ‘risk’ and ‘otherness’ in the nation state, and the exploitation of real fears in the wake of real school violence, have permitted a culture of acute surveillance that significantly alters the enterprise of school-based, ethnographic research.

Dear Visitor: You have been given a pass which indicates a specific room number. You are not permitted to be anywhere else in the building.
Thank you for your cooperation.

(Office of Security and Discipline, signed by the Principal and Assistant Principal Security)

Foucault prophesied: ‘A whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers (both these terms in the plural)—from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations. It is surprising how long the problem of space took to emerge as an historicopolitical problem’ (1980, p. 149). Space and subjectivity are inextricably linked. Recently in one of our New York schools, as a researcher, I (Gallagher) knew my place straight away. Presented to me by a security guard, the above-cited letter from the ‘Office of Discipline and Security’ demarcated the

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particular classroom in which I was permitted to visit and reinforced the off-limit areas of the rest of the school. But schools, of course, are playing their part in a larger system of administrative control and institutional governance. There is a range of public institutions that, like schools, are regulating citizens, containing risk, and governing space, all in the interest of creating ‘safer’ communities. One might argue that the real power of ethnographic study, then, lies in its ability to observe and trouble such everyday practices, the ordinary and habitual moments in given cultures. We would further argue that studies of space create a unique and vibrant theoretical context within which to consider the so-called ordinary comings and goings, the habitual moments of researchers, students, and teachers in schools. These theoretical frameworks allow us to think particularly about urban schools and neo-liberal tactics of security and surveillance at the intersections of subjectivity, architectural design, representation, regulation, power and ideology. The critical episodes presented in this paper, in dialogue with the theoretical concepts of space and subjectivity, consequently urge a continued, thoughtful consideration of how the ‘great strategies of geo-politics’ shape and are shaped by the everyday ‘tactics of the habitat’, as they currently bear down, in what we argue is an unprecedented way, on the work of ethnographic researchers and all those whose ‘ordinary’ lives unfold in schools.

This ethnographic exploration describes how public schools, in a climate of fear and insecurity, are looking to spatial, surveillance and I.D. technologies to make their spaces ‘safe’. To examine this trend, the ethnographers’ empirical observations and experiences will be presented as critical episodes throughout the text in order to substantiate and extend the theoretical concerns of the paper. We will use spatial theory, and particularly a Foucauldian analysis of space, power, and the subject, as a frame within which to analyse these moves toward security in North American urban schools. To this end, the paper draws, in particular, on Foucauldian concepts of discipline, panopticism and governmentality, to suggest that contemporary measures of surveillance are part of a longer history in which disciplinary power operates by organizing architectural and public spaces, and fostering self-governance on the part of its subjects. In dialogue with these theoretical ideas, the empirical data point to technologies of record-keeping, identification-verifyifying, and spatial arrangements that are producing altered experiences of subjectivity for youth, teachers, administrators, and researchers in public school space.

Rather than an examination of ethnographic methodologies, therefore, this paper looks substantively at new configurations of, and current policies governing, public school space, as seen through the empirical lens of a recent ethnographic study of students’ social identities in the context of their drama classrooms in four New York and Toronto schools. We theorize, in particular, two critical episodes taken from the ethnographic fieldnote data. What we hope to achieve, ultimately, is an ethno- and geo- graphic picture and theoretical analysis of the kinds of public school spaces that need to be anticipated and negotiated by researchers of contemporary ethnographic studies of schools and classrooms. What we are suggesting is that new systems of surveillance in schools are necessarily altering the research practices
of ethnographers. In our case, what began as a study examining the experiences of adolescents in urban drama classrooms, in order to develop a theoretical and empirically grounded account of the dynamic social forces of inclusion and exclusion experienced by them, inexorably expanded into a broader examination of the forces of security and governmentality that impact upon students’ experiences of the curriculum and their everyday school lives. Obviously, these heightened security practices calibrate the kinds of ethnographies that are possible and produce research/the researcher within a purported culture of ubiquitous risk. This ‘culture’ has practical implications. In our inquiry, questions in interviews with young people, for instance, turned toward our shared experiences of containment and surveillance in the school such that a new set of understandings began to preoccupy us;

Researcher: Do you think that school safety and security measures are unfair to some/all students?
Student: Sometimes school safety pays attention to things that aren’t as important and miss what is really going on.
Researcher: If you ran the school, how would you approach the problem of safety?
Student: I’d make sure my security guards were both diverse and not racist.

Post 9/11, and in the wake of local tragedies like the shootings in Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (April 20, 1999) and W. R. Myers High School in Taber Alberta (April 28, 1999), schools—as one important public site—have shouldered a barrage of new surveillance and security regimes. As an extension to studies of the geographies of youth culture and schools (Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Fielding, 2000; Valentine, 2000; Yon, 2000; Holt, 2003; Lesko, 2001), this paper will scrutinize the combustible intersections between such new regimes of security and surveillance and prevailing theoretical concepts of space and I.D.ology.

In the current political moment of homeland (and otherland) safety and security (USA)\(^4\) and emergency preparedness (Canada),\(^5\) there is unprecedented attention being paid to the containment, movement, and dispersal of people in public spaces. The interplay of global and local spatial practices has never been quite so acute in the North American context of public institutional life. From this, a new security emerges, one in which the calculation of potential risk calls for a re-articulation, and indeed an invention, of new disciplinary technologies. Here, we use disciplinary technologies in the Foucauldian sense to mean the strategies of power and control over people and spaces and the rationalization of techniques to serve that end.

Examining some contemporary and troubling trends within the mass schooling systems of Canada and the US, we argue that recent neo-liberal discourses of ‘emergency preparedness’ (official Canadian government discourse), ‘homeland security’ (official US government discourse), ‘safe schools’ and ‘zero-tolerance’ (official Canadian and US public school policy discourses),\(^6\) enable public spaces, and especially public schools, to be produced in ways that corroborate neo-liberal ideologies. These ideologies, and the policies that proceed from them, place a premium on security, police the borders of home/school, and prevent the penetration of the other/ the outsider/ the risk, in everyday life. We are playing on the term ‘ideology’
in the title, precisely because these now common practices, in schools and Western societies more generally, require an unrelenting self-consciousness of one’s identity, a material and (geo)graphic verification of one’s ‘authentic’ self. While historically and philosophically the term ‘ideology’ has two referents—one morally neutral as in ‘ideational’, the second given a negative moral valence, as in false consciousness or obfuscation—we take the term in marriage with the above-named and other social/school policies that embed the notion of risk and in/security. And we use the term ‘neoliberalism’ in its broad sense clearly articulated by Giroux (2005, pp. 5–6); that is, as ‘the hegemonic ideology of our time [that], much more than an economic theory, can also be defined as a cultural politics that has created an array of institutions and public spheres from which to produce, disseminate, and secure its ideologies, values, and views of the world’.

The technologies of public school space: a theoretical frame

Space is a social morphology . . . To picture space as a ‘frame’ or a container into which nothing can be put unless it is smaller than the recipient, and to imagine that this container has no other purpose than to preserve what has been put in it—this is probably the initial error. But is it error or ideology? The latter, more than likely. If so who promotes it? Who exploits it? And why and how do they do so? (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 94)

Lefebvre’s questions above point to the ways in which we have conceptualized space in this paper. We want to think about how governments and school boards, in the neo-liberal order, exploit the spaces of schools, in order to erect and maintain the boundaries between legal citizens and dangerous ‘others’. In this account of the new security measures in New York and Toronto schools, and the bureaucratic measures that must be negotiated in order to access these schools, we suggest, in the Lefebvrian (1991) sense, that the scanning systems, the identification procedures, and new organizations of space are the material realization of security ideologies. It was Lefebvre (1991) who first introduced the concept of ‘social space’. Social space ‘incorporates social actions’ (p. 33). Social space is not just space in itself, it is not a frame or a container that is designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it (pp. 93–4). On the contrary, for Lefebvre, social space ‘is at once work and product—a materialization of “social being”’ (pp. 101–2; emphasis added). According to Lefebvre (1991), all societies ‘secrete’ space, producing and appropriating it as they go along. Lefebvre’s text, The production of space, translated from French in 1991, appeared to be a catalyst for an interest in the field of cultural and human geographies. Although his work has been critiqued for its structural dualism, its celebration of heterosexuality, and lack of race analysis (Shields, 2004), his theorizing of the production of space enabled the development of theories of space that investigate the links between everyday spatial practices and various socio-cultural relations in (post)modernity. For instance, in the last decade there has been a focus on aspects of space and the construction of subjectivities with respect to: identity and the body (DeLauretis, 1998; Razack, 1999); resistance in space and
place (Ruddick, 1990, 1997; Mitchell, 1995; Sibley, 1995; Pile & Keith, 1997); the
gendering of space (Duncan, 1996; Massey, 2000); space and the performance of
sexuality (Wigley, 1992; Bell et al., 1994; Bell & Valentine, 1995; Grosz, 1995;
Valentine, 1996; De Lauretis, 1998); and how space is produced through racialized
practices and (neo)colonialism (Razack, 1998, 2000, 2002; Mohanram, 1999).

How does the governance of subjects and the organization of space interlock in
school spaces? “The 3rd floor’s dangerous. Mind you, there’s more security on that floor
(grade 11 student, Queens, New York)”. In Discipline and punish, Foucault (1977)
demonstrates that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, the organization of
space was linked to the aims and techniques of the government of societies. He
suggests that great attention was paid to the layout of cities, and public and private
spaces. He argues that school buildings were scrutinized because it was important
that ‘educational space function like a learning machine’ (p. 147), and that it
function to distinguish between students’ worth, character, and progress. The
organization of space in schools (i.e. rows of desks, corridors, courtyards, entrance-
ways, holding-rooms) form a perpetual grid for the organization, supervising, and
hierarchizing of individuals. We want to argue that spatial distributions in schools
that characterized eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European bourgeois concerns
for discipline and learning are now more forcefully directed toward the problem of
identifying potentially dangerous and criminal others. In fact, we would suggest that
the ways in which the ‘problems of discipline’ were addressed in nineteenth-century
schools are the obvious antecedents to the ways in which security is now produced
and managed:

Unfortunately, the school has used that space [the theatre auditorium] for other things,
non-theatre related… as a holding place for students, in the morning… because of the
number of students that have to come in. They need a place to go, um, because of the
scanning. I mean, you can imagine the backlog, if, if we couldn’t stagger that. So they
stagger it by having like, kind of, an open entrance in the morning, but the kids that
don’t have a class at that time, they need a place to stay. They can’t go in the hallway.
So, now they put them downstairs, in the theatre, which has been, kind of, a battle that I
fight [Kathleen: Yeah, I’m sure] because, you know, it’s getting destroyed. You put kids
that don’t really care about, you know… but they’re sitting in the theatre, you
know… and they, you know, break this chair, or they’re… frustrated or restless… and… [trails off] (teacher, Queens, New York)

While Foucault most certainly developed his ideas of discipline, power and spatial
organization for a specific time and place—emphasizing the way a whole host of
institutions emerged in the nineteenth century, bearing important resemblances to
one another, such as the school, the prison, and the hospital—his work remains
important in the mapping of ‘many of the more questionable contours of the present’

What are the questionable contours of the present? First, all those who hold a
measure of authority are placed in a state of perpetual high alert. Scanning systems,
and other security procedures, are based on the assumption that criminality is active
and ever present. Second, space is, thus, designed to communicate the message that
transgressors, deviants, or those who threaten the social and spatial order have no place here. (They stick us in the ‘sweep room’ just because we missed the bell by 2 seconds. It’s ridiculous: grade 12 student, Queens, New York.) To paraphrase Foucault (1978), pedagogical institutions, in these times of heightened security and alert, have multiplied the forms of discourses on the subject of security; they have established various points of implantation for criminality and danger; they have coded and (dis)qualified (un)worthy individuals. And, as Philo (2004) might suggest, they have made clear the difference between same (accepted conventions for thought and action) and other (unacceptable mass of activities of those who slip beyond the boundaries of what is ‘normal’).

With this in mind, we suggest that the spatial organization in these schools, and in other public institutions, work to produce new experiences of subjectivity and space, through the creation of particular strategies of security and spatial practices of order and regulation. In an empirical study of an urban university athletic centre space, Fusco (2006) illustrates that even in some of the most mundane spaces (changing rooms), technologies of power—surveillance, classification, normalization, spatial distribution, and regulation—operate. Fusco demonstrates that concerns about risk, deviance, and transgression are ever present. In fact, the spatial arrangements of locker-rooms (e.g. angular, straight edges, the preponderance of open showers, and mirrors) and the surveillance strategies enabled by these arrangements (e.g. staff use the mirrors to perform quick visual sweeps of the locker-room) function to keep everyone on high alert and in their place. As one participant in the study remarked: ‘There are a lot of eyes on this space!’ This functions to remind the subjects of space that constant vigilance is required, and is in place, to guard the property, propriety, and health of the social body. Likewise, school architecture, with its long corridors and contained classrooms, for example, produces particular ‘social spaces’ that contribute to the regulation of behaviours. If we see schools as performing particular spatial practices that make use of an array of architectural arrangements and surveillance technologies to survey and document the movement of individuals, then we might also say that the spatial technologies of schools are fully embedded in systems of domination that guarantee the legibility (i.e. the identification) of all the subjects who move in, and through, those spaces:

*Fieldnote, excerpt, May 13, 2004, Queens, New York*

A metal, windowless door, with ‘welcome’ in bright blue. But it’s locked. Kids can’t get in. Neither can we. A black parent arrives with us. She also sighs at the locked door. When we’re admitted, we collectively bemoan the security system. A security guard overhears us and says that there are teachers in New York who won’t teach in a school without security. I say it’s a shame and he and the parent explain that they’re ‘safer’ and, besides, ‘it’s a different world now’. The parent then offers, ‘They need Jesus, that’s the problem’. I ask why they feel safer here and the guard says that in other schools every kid could have a weapon.

New spatial technologies (i.e. security gates, metal detectors, portable wands, holding rooms for students/visitors, school building configurations, scanners and security cameras) are the material manifestations of the fears that dominant groups
have about members of ‘risky’, and/or marginalized groups. These technologies are fundamental to the exercise of power in modern societies. Foucault (1977) argues that disciplinary power emerged with the advent of modern institutions such as schools and other institutions in the nineteenth century. Schools still embody aspects of this function, that is, disciplining regimes, which seek to mould and reform their subjects, making useful, calculable, responsible citizens. Yet, simultaneously a different regime of power is being overlaid. In these schools, the functioning of power produces new kinds of social spaces and new kinds of identities, all circulating within the discourses of security and risk. Concomitantly, new security practices are as concerned with excluding and expelling danger as they are with reforming behavior. Institutions of discipline and schooling are now being articulated within new neo-liberal practices of risk management, surveillance, and identity control, which enable a ‘potentially infinite multiplication of the possibilities for intervention’ (Castel, 1991, p. 289). What is clear is that technologies of mass surveillance, like those used commonly in North American schools, are central to the constitution of spaces of risk and security and these technologies work to construct new understandings of bodies in space and time. As Lupton (1999) states: ‘Discourses of risk, then, are directed at the regulation of the body: how it moves in space, how it interacts with other bodies and things’ (p. 88). These discourses, in turn, contribute to the constitution of new kinds of subjectivities: self-regulating individuals who take up governmental imperatives, and new kinds of spaces, which are highly policed and regulated to ensure that members of threatening groups are removed (Lupton, 1999). It is these kinds of risk management strategies that are prevalent in the (re)organization of schools in times of ‘emergency preparedness’ and ‘homeland security’.

To summarize, what we are now seeing is that spatial arrangements of schools are, in fact, no longer governed by the physical architectural boundaries alone, they are governed by sophisticated systems of electronic surveillance. In fact, Virilo (1997) suggests that architecture itself has little to do with individual architects’ power over the building per se; recent design, he argues, has emerged from perceived public security requirements. We live, according to Virilo, in overexposed cities, and we would add, overexposed public school environments. School space, then, can be read as strategies of (spatial) inclusion and exclusion that ‘are often explicitly concerned with maintaining certain bodies within geographical limits’ (Lupton, 1999, p. 142). The school gate gives way to the security gateway:

Critical episode 1, fieldnote reflection, Jamaica Queens, New York City, January 16, 2004
At least we know we’re safe in here. Normal fights but no weapons and the kids are totally used to it. (teacher, Queens, New York, January 16, 2004)

Arriving at one of the study sites, I [Gallagher] approach the school. Large, hanging banners outside the school exclaim: ‘New York School of Excellence’ and another ‘Theatre and Education Award for Excellence’. Solid metal doors, where windows used to be, at this main entrance. I enter with the pack of students. Each of us, teachers, students, and Canadian visitors line up to proceed through the security process, carefully placing our bags on conveyor belts, passing through the metal detectors and
frisked by the wand scanner on the other side. Once admitted, I must check in with the
police officer on the other side of the door. No ‘Athlete of the Year’ pictures, no
Valedictorian Addresses donning these walls. In the ‘holding area’, I show my picture
I.D. and sign in, as a visitor. While I am doing this, droves of young people are swiping
their identification cards and I am watching their mostly black and brown faces appear
on a large overhanging computer screen, authenticating their identities. Suddenly, a
loud computer-animated voice calls out: ‘This student is suspended. Stop this student.’
A young black girl gets pulled aside by a teacher and is loudly interrogated. She denies any
wrongdoing: ‘What??! I’m supposed to come back. Tsss …’ But she is dragged away. I
am amazed by the efficiency of this system. And by how unremarkable it all seems to
these young people.

I finally meet the teacher whose classroom I will be observing this day. ‘That’s quite a
welcoming committee in the foyer’, I quip. ‘Well you wanted an urban school’, he replies
in all seriousness. And then further explains, ‘At least we know we’re safe in here.
Normal fights but no weapons and the kids are totally used to it’ (teacher, January 16,
2004).

The teacher introduces me to the student ‘spokesperson’ for the school. I ask her what
she is called on to speak about and the teacher—not the student—explains that she
has recently represented the school very well when the media decided to do a piece
about how this school had turned its violence around through the installation of the
‘scanning system’. Well that and ‘Operation clear sweep’. This, he explains, is a drill
whereby the principal randomly calls for an ‘operation clear sweep’ over the public
address system and all students must clear the halls immediately or be taken down to
the office for ‘disciplinary measures’. ‘It really makes us feel safe’, he explains one last
time.

Many theories of space examine how public space is mapped in order to create
areas of security while keeping disorder and non-normative others contained
(Ruddick, 1990, 1997; Sibley, 1995; Valentine, 1997; Razack, 2000, 2002). The
spatial technologies of schools, such as identification-verification systems and
security gates, enable spatial arrangements to be used continuously to monitor the
circulation and flow of individuals. It is important to also acknowledge that public
spaces are fragmented and are sites of contestation, that is, marginalized groups may
occupy and experience public spaces differently (and in transgressive ways) from
those desired outcomes intended by (dominant groups’) measures of public order
(Delaney, 1994): ‘What??! I’m supposed to come back. Tsss …’. It appears,
however, that for students and staff (and even visiting researchers) in this school, the
possibilities of knowing space outside dominant regulatory and disciplinary
structures are becoming more and more limited. In the case of our transgressing
student, accused of being under suspension, her only crime (if we are to trust the
system) appears to be an attempt to return to school prematurely. We do not know
(nor is it our business, those of us witnessing this public interrogation) why she is
suspended. Neither can we know whether the system is malfunctioning on this day, a
data entry error perhaps? The girl may be perfectly entitled to return to school. Or
she may, in fact, be circumventing her punishment (i.e. short-changing her
suspension), in which case, what we do know is that the system does not discriminate
between ‘real’ crimes (an ‘intruder’ attempting to enter the school or a student
armed with a weapon, for instance) and minor infractions (wearing a hat, carrying a
cell phone, speaking disrespectfully or returning from a suspension prematurely). What we are suggesting here is quite simply that the punishment does not suit the crime, the reaction does not suit the reality, the public harassment is unwarranted. As one New York grade 12 student later claimed:

Security guards treat students they are not familiar with, different.

Yet these practices and technologies are normalized, naturalized, and literally come under the radar. Our perspective is skewed when these relatively unthreatening behaviors are criminalized and positioned as security threats. The technological mechanisms that the students, staff, and researcher(s) are subjected to ensure that the school becomes protected space. These mechanisms are an essential part of the strategies used by dominant groups (in this case, school administration and private security companies) to police the public space of the school. Members of threatening groups (i.e. threatening to school property, to other school members, or even to school disciplinary procedures) are identified, restricted, and denied entry to this educational space. The space of the school, in which these threatening individuals and/or groups (might) move about, becomes potentially ‘dangerous’ posing an increased risk of criminal activity. While there are, undeniably, real material consequences to violence and/or weapons in schools, here, the ever-present anticipation of risk has resulted in increased surveillance, security guard presence, and vigilance on the part of those who inhabit, and are inhabited by, this increasingly privatized space. In such a way, the school, and its spatial organization, acts as a ‘functional site’, this creates a permanent grid of security that eradicates any confusion over what is legal and/or illegal in this space (Foucault, 1977):

You cannot be partial when it comes to safety. (grade 11 student, Queens, New York)

To further extend this argument, Foucault (1977) proposes that the maintenance of discipline and order (in modernity) requires that individuals be distributed in space, he calls this ‘the art of distributions’. Foucault’s examination of prisons, schools, and other public institutions concludes that ‘the art of distributions’ requires that several techniques – enclosures, partitioning, and functional sites—be employed to organize the new economies of bodies and spaces; these help:

- to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits. (Foucault, p. 143)

As such, and as the researcher (Gallagher) experienced through her room assignment, in these new highly regulated spaces, ‘each individual has his [sic] own place; and each place its individual’ (Foucault, 1977, p.143). Or, in the case of ‘Operation clear sweep’, ‘safe’ space is also produced by removing, on command, all individuals from common, open space. Foucault’s (1977) analysis of plague quarantine is useful here to deconstruct the functioning of power inherent in ‘Operation clear sweep.’ He states: ‘each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the
risk of his life, contagion or punishment’ (p. 194). ‘Operation clear sweep’ imposes a kind of quarantine or curfew on students. The open, more public spaces of the school must not be transgressed. All movement is monitored; violators are subjected to disciplinary procedures. In addition, the scanning system not only operates as a machine for supervising and identifying individuals, it rewards those who can pass through the gates; the reward: freedom to enter and not be picked out, ‘ratted on’ by the scanning-computer. Nevertheless, each student, staff member, and/or researcher, who successfully negotiates the scanning system, is then limited and governed inside the gated school. Importantly, however, disciplinary technologies not only control, subdue and discipline individuals, they also make virtuous, productive, healthy, safe, enterprising, and empowered individuals (Rose, 1996):

No, I don’t pay attention to that [security measures] because I don’t really get in trouble. (grade 11 student, Queens, New York)

Indeed, Foucault’s concept of governance, or more accurately ‘governmentality’, has been defined as ‘the contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self’ (Foucault, in Fox, 1994, p. 32). The dissemination of these disciplinary technologies into public space, then, secures, and is also secured by, the active participation of individuals in the very disciplinary mechanisms that measure, classify, normalize, and potentially exclude them. Teachers, students, administrators, and caretakers are both the subjects and the guardians of social space. Fusco’s (2003) spatial ethnography of a university athletic centre changing-room clearly demonstrates this latter point. Indeed, she found that individuals are both enabled and constrained by, in this case, public health ideologies that operate on, and govern, social space. She concluded that people—who administer, clean, and use institutionalized recreational space—derive pleasure from maintaining the ideological ordering of space. In other words, each ‘worthy’ individual gains from the architectural, spatial and security arrangements in some way. And in schools, these are the necessary material and subjective conditions for the establishment of what is now understood as ‘safe’ school space:

Critical episode 2, fieldnote reflection, Brooklyn, New York, January 14, 2004
This computer thinks that’s some kind of alien address, mam. I can’t accept that. (fingerprinting agent, Department of Education, Brooklyn, New York)

The ‘dangerous class’ is what Italian philosopher and political theorist Giorgio Agamben has called us. Professor Agamben was due to arrive in January 2004, to take up a visiting scholar appointment at New York University. And as a distinguished professor being honored by the university, he was scheduled to offer an intensive graduate course. But Professor Agamben cancelled his trip as protest against the new American policy of fingerprinting for visitors and employees from other countries. Professor Agamben, speaking to Le Monde in Paris, suggests that we have been made into ‘the ideal suspect’. The New York Times (Saturday, January 17, 2004, B4) went on to report that Dean Foley, of the Faculty of Arts and Science at NYU, was ‘eager and hopeful that in future years he can take up the appointment again’. I am not convinced that there will be such a return to innocence that Dean Foley is counting on.
As a Canadian researcher, I [Gallagher] made it through ‘Homeland Security’, through US customs at Pearson International Airport in Toronto, and on to my New York City destination. I was not fingerprinted, nor did I have my retina scanned, although I did need to explain in some detail how I had met the friends with whom I would be staying during my time in Manhattan. ‘At a play’ was not what the customs agent was expecting, but sufficiently benevolent sounding, I suppose. My surveillance nightmare began once I arrived, however.

The demand to have all security approvals in place delayed the New York piece of my study by 18 months. Despite undergoing an extensive ethical review process at the University of Toronto, another process entirely was required by the New York Department of Education in order to gain access to New York schools. And that process involved a fingerprinting ordeal, the likes of which I could not have previously fathomed.

No one expects a smooth process with such bureaucratic procedures and mine was no exception: A crowded waiting room with no instructions apparent; unclear forms to be filled in; rooms to pass through in no obvious order. I was ordered to stay seated until it was my turn, but no one knew whose turn it was, nor in what order and to which rooms we should be proceeding. After an hour’s wait, with people all around defensively explaining to one another that they were here because of a job requirement, that there was no ‘other’ reason they were being fingerprinted, I was finally called to a desk. Evidently, the computer system is unequipped to register addresses outside the US. It could not accept a Canadian postal code and I had no zip code to offer. We were unable to proceed to the next screen and therefore I could not be fingerprinted, the clerk explained calmly. Actually, she said: ‘this computer thinks that’s some kind of alien address, mam. I can’t accept that.’ After offering my American friends’ address with an appropriate zip code, we were able to proceed. It was a rather protracted experience and having never been fingerprinted before, I couldn’t agree more with Professor Agamben. I was the ‘ideal suspect’, with an ‘alien’ address. But this, I would learn, is really nothing compared to what high school students are subjected to every day.

What we are seeing in schools—and in the bureaucratic procedures one must submit to in order to access these schools—is how investments in security and discipline are remaking individuals (and communities) in terms of how they might potentially contaminate, terrorize and/or abuse the measures of public and spatial order in schools. Foucault’s (1977) theorizing of the panopticon is useful here because it demonstrates how power can work to produce disciplined and docile (subjected and useful) bodies—bodies that can be regulated in time and space. Foucault based his concept of the panopticon on Jeremy Bentham’s design of a (panoptic) circular prison (1840s) that was supposed to act in such a way that prisoners would be totally visible to prison guards, yet prisoners could never be entirely sure whether or not they were being observed. Conceptually, the panopticon is:

- enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which the uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised through division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed ... [it] constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (p. 197)
In order for the panopticon, and its mode of surveillance, to operate efficiently and effectively, permanent registration is necessary (Foucault, 1977). Fingerprinting—the examination and recording of one’s ‘authenticity’—objectifies each individual and makes him or her a ‘case’; it documents his/her possible use or potential abuse of the homeland. In this climate, the process of fingerprinting, formerly reserved for criminals, is normalized. And these examinations ensure that individuals are embedded in a field of documentation; a meticulous archive of dangerous, and not-so dangerous, classes of individuals and groups. If your zip code cannot be verified, if here is not your home, if you hail from elsewhere, then you cannot proceed. As such, this bureaucratic, disciplinary, and panoptic mechanism ‘arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated distributions’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 219).

In the fingerprinting waiting area, and in schools and other public institutions, each individual tries to assure the other that they are being fingerprinted and scanned for legitimate reasons. Foucault (1977) suggests that the ‘beauty’ of the panoptic system is that it works at its fullest potential when self-surveillance occurs. Because individuals are never sure if they are being observed, they then begin to regulate their own behaviour in order not to be caught out. This is an enormously efficient system for the administration of power, control and risk management because:

> it automizes and disindividualizes power. Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up. (Foucault, 1977, p. 202)

It is through an array of panoptic disciplinary mechanisms, then, that each individual comes to know her/himself and others, his/her own and others’ proper distribution in space. Full cooperation only requires a/the finger, not as a gesture of resistance or subversion, but as a gesture of verification of good citizenship, with fixed (homeland) address, and no previous (dangerous) record. Participation in disciplinary mechanisms confirms our investment in homeland security and school policing. If, as Foucault (1977) argues, individuals are a fabrication of the technologies of power, then we suggest that worthy citizens become points of application for security ideologies. Deeply embedded in the disciplinary mechanisms and discourses of security, risk and power, students and (fingerprinted) workers and researchers depend on these discourses for their continued existence and affirmation. In fact, being a subject means being subjected to discourses we rarely choose, but, paradoxically, this subjection initiates and sustains our agency (Butler, 1997):

> Safety and security measures aren’t unfair to me, so I can’t complain about anything. (grade 11 student, Queens, New York)

Thus, we are all implicated in these ideologies and in the territorialization of space and ‘unworthy’ others. Anything else would result in our eviction.
Implications and conclusion

How does knowin’ my business make you any safer? (student, Toronto High School)\(^7\)

Amidst a lively classroom discussion in a downtown Toronto school, one young black woman blurs out this question. Young bodies in urban Toronto schools are asking their teachers, and principals, and each other, why new policies are policing what they wear, how they move, and whether they ‘belong’. Kilian’s (1998) theorizing of public and private space is useful here. He argues that we should not rely on binary notions of *public versus private*. Rather, he suggests that we must analyze environments with respect to ‘power of access’ and ‘power of exclusion’. The female student’s retort not only challenges her fellow student, but also questions an entire school system that is, ever-increasingly, dependent upon the continuous recording, monitoring, and archiving of students’ personal lives. These school policies permanently register details of students’ private lives. (Ontario schools maintain *OSRs* (Ontario student records) on all school-age students in Ontario which follow them from school to school) and make those lives public (school) property.)

In one Toronto school, the year-old and greatly despised ‘no hat’ policy has given way to a storm of protest from young people. Particularly youth of colour insist that this particular policy is not only unfair and over-zealous, but that it is racist too. The (white) Goth students are not forbidden to wear their spiked necklaces and bracelets, but the black students cannot wear skullcaps, do rags, bandanas or caps. The colours of bandanas are believed to be associated with gangs and, therefore, can incite violence in schools, they are told by administrators. Not missing the irony, the black students note that their ‘attire’ is associated with gang-related activity, even though most popular depictions of the gun-wielding students in Columbine were ‘Goth’ (white faces, black trenchcoats) in their appearance. While some forms of surveillance, like I.D. scanner machines seem undiscriminating in their procedures, others, like the policing of clothing in the interest of ‘safety’, seem to many students targeted toward certain (minoritized) students and not others. During this animated classroom discussion, one (white, male) student, with a comic turn, quipped that the ‘no hat’ rule might have a positive effect because if there was a masked killer lurking on school property, he would be stopped by a teacher: ‘Remove your hat, it’s a school rule!’ This young man has, perhaps, the possibility of seeing this ‘dangerous other’ as someone *outside* the school, someone for whom he could not possibly be mistaken. For others, this is not so easy.

We are well aware of the symbolic and very real violence that exists in schools in Canada and the US. Weapons in schools lead to serious, sometimes fatal, consequences for youth. Schools need to be safe for young people and teachers. Students and school personnel, too, have a right to be free from harassment, but how we go about making safer *and more humane* school corridors and classrooms for young people is of equal importance. When Gallagher asked students in New York, in individual interviews, how they would approach the problem of safety if they ran the school, their responses were thoughtful and considered:
I wouldn’t make the students feel inferior to the adults.

First of all, I wouldn’t have a jail. All I would ask the students is how they would like to see the school run.

But youth have very few avenues of recourse in schools, very limited ways to register their dissatisfaction with policies and procedures. In one classroom at a Toronto school, over 50% of the students in a grade 12 English class had 0% going into the final exam. They had 0%, according to their teacher, because they were never there. The chronic absenteeism in this school might be a sign of student apathy, as is often suggested, but it might also be the result of increased efforts to keep the ‘undesirables’ out. One student at the school explained that she felt safe at the school because ‘most of the people who make it unsafe never come’.

School administration teams need to respond to the terrifying acts of violence we have witnessed in schools in the US and Canada in the recent past. But there is no question that one is made to feel criminal in these instances of extreme surveillance, and as long as people/schools remain convinced that these technologies of security make them safer, we would not like to speculate about how these ‘safety measures’ might be amplified and rationalized with very little consideration of their impact on our collective psyche. On the question of striking a balance between security and personal privacy in schools, another young black woman in a Toronto school exclaimed:

Yeah, but now with the way it is, you can’t even be yourself and school is where you’re supposed to be yourself.

Yon (2000), in his critical ethnography of a Toronto school, calls this a ‘spoiled identity’, when the expectations of certain students and certain schools are so low as to completely marginalize and disempower them. Now, in the new criminalized environments of high schools, these students are not only unlikely to produce anything of worth, but they are also imagined to be lurking around the next corner, just waiting to transgress some rule or cause harm to others. Research does tell us that young people often play the roles they are given; if we were students in a ‘New York City School of Excellence’, we would certainly be troubled by how the day begins. Until, of course, we became numbed by the repetition of the experience wherein we routinely open our bags, feel the prying surface of a weapon-searching wand, and scan and verify our identity. All before period 1.

Canadian schools seem to have not, yet, adopted the same degree of surveillance that is commonplace in New York schools. But many Canadian schools have already installed metal detectors, video camera surveillance, and have implemented I.D. tags. A culture already fearful of youth, exacerbated by sensational media reports across the country, has served to rationalize a regime of security measures while, unsurprisingly, entrenching a criminal view of urban youth in and outside schools. Security measures are remaking schools; they are becoming, or perhaps reverting to, correctional facilities for the training of a new generation of citizens in the arts of urban, national conduct. In other words, those in schools are kept safe and protected
for their own good. And this new generation of citizens confronts fear, risk, and surveillance (of self and others) every day.

We are well prepared to admit that issues of security and safety in schools need a serious rethinking, but we must also pay careful attention to the new ways in which risk management in schools and public institutions, to paraphrase Foucault (1977), characterizes, classifies, and distributes individuals along a scale, around a norm, and how its strategies hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualifies and invalidates them (p. 223). The notions of risk and otherness, and the potential exploitation of real fears, that we have explored in this paper are easily extended to other public institutions like universities, hospitals, community and recreation centres, shopping-malls, parklands, and street corners. What is important to note is that in this intensified climate of homeland (and school) security, spatial arrangements, and the technologies that operate in space, still establish who is respectable and who is not. It is clear, from the experience of fingerprinting, airport customs, and school I.D. scanning, that ‘space determines who belongs to the nation state and who does not’ (Razack, 1998, p. 367).

What is the role ethnography plays in understanding such contemporary discourses and their attendant practices? Ethnographies, such as the one that has provided the material experiences for this conceptual exploration, can provide accounts of everyday practices in education that are implicated in social (re)production. Analyses of these accounts, such as the critical episodes outlined in this paper, expose-ironically-the invisibility, the naturalizing of such policies. These policies in practice are not simply inconveniences to be endured. What we hope to have illustrated in this paper is how schools still clearly embody aspects of disciplinary functions, such as those articulated by Foucault in his genealogy of discipline and power, as examined through analyses of a range of nineteenth-century social and political institutions, but also how a different regime of power is being overlaid through new practices of risk management, surveillance, and identity control. Ethnography, as an orientation and set of methodological practices, promotes the possibility of interpretation, inter-penetration, and critical understanding. Rich empirical ethnographic, ‘everyday’ accounts can be productively re-encountered through engagements with theories of space, subjectivity, and governmentality, as we have argued here. This analytical move goes some distance towards illuminating the ‘givens’ of social reproduction through which current neo-liberal ideologies are operating seamlessly in North American schools. In its finest moments, this strategy of ethnographic analysis may even create the conditions for intervention in current policies by demonstrating and critiquing the idea that these policies, while promoting a certain kind of social order, also obviously fortify the self/(dangerous)other binary and limit the possibility for a critical, democratic citizenry. To propose new norms of justice, embedded in concrete educational policy, is clearly the next step and, decidedly, the work of another paper.
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Notes
2. The empirical data used in this paper come from Gallagher’s (2002–2005) study, ‘Drama, education, youth, and social cohesion: (re)constructing identities in urban contexts’.
3. Although we are not addressing in this paper specifically Foucault’s contribution to ethnographic forms, we would nevertheless like to note that, in his genealogies of various nineteenth-century institutions, he read archival documents as ‘events’. Current theorists argue that Foucault’s genealogies can, as such, be considered ‘tools of analysis’ (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003).
4. With strong bipartisan support, President Bush created the Department of Homeland Security, the most comprehensive reorganization of the Federal government in a half-century. The Department of Homeland Security consolidates 22 agencies and 180,000 employees, unifying once-fragmented Federal functions in a single agency dedicated to protecting America from terrorism: http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland
5. The creation of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC) fulfills the fundamental role of government to secure the public’s safety and security. PSEPC is dedicated to minimizing a continuum of risks to Canadians—from risks to personal safety from crime or naturally occurring events, such as severe blizzards, floods, or forest fires, to threats to national security from terrorist activity: http://www.oocipep.gc.ca/
6. In the US, following a three-year partnership (Safe School Initiative) between the Department of Education and the Secret Service, two reports were published that detail the study’s findings and lay out a process for threat assessment in schools: Implications for Prevention of school attacks in the United States: a guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates: http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac_ssi.shtml. In Canada education is under provincial jurisdiction. The Ontario Safe Schools Act 2000 is intended to increase respect and responsibility and to set standards for safe learning and safe teaching in schools: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/safeschl/eng/ssa.html
7. For a further analysis of this vital conversation among students in one Toronto public school see Gallagher and Lortie (2005).

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