Introduction

I think the message [*Beverly Hills 90210*[1]] tries to give [is] don't be so provocative, 'cause it might get you into trouble. But it does not necessarily have to be like that. Just because a guy see a girl looking sexy and with tight things does not necessarily mean that she wants to get raped. . . . People have their freedom, and you know that's wrong for other people to violate it like that.

—Marina,[2] Dominican American,[3] age 12

I'm gonna make my own movies and put 'em on [my own cable station, named Silver Screen]. Then I'm gonna have, like, a talk show, with famous people on it. And I'll have Silver Screen specials, like, shows about topics in the news that have to deal with family matters, like drugs and alcohol and playing with guns and AIDS and, uh, pregnancy and that stuff. Like two hour-specials on that. . . . [And] world news, like CNN. . . . It's gonna be a long newscast. It'll, like, be an intermission between movies. . . . I'm gonna have one movie that I play maybe every other week, not every day, I'm gonna have so many movies that I won't have time to play another movie over again.

—Christopher, African American, age 12

[Oprah Winfrey] gets on my nerves. 'Cause when she has, like, a victim up there, it's very disturbing. And . . . the person is up there crying, instead of, like, going for a break or something, she'll go, "Tell me more, tell me more. Come on, come on, tell me more." And it's just, like, you know, enough is enough. . . . It's kind of disturbing to see someone, like, so insensitive and so uncaring. For her to just be like, 'Come on, go on—it's OK if you cry and break down. Actually, that's what I want; it will get me ratings. Come on.' You know? It's just, I don't like her.

—Samantha, Irish–Jewish American, age 12

Why talk with young people about TV? It is important to talk *with* children and adolescents to counter the nature of much public discourse that talks *about* them and their interactions with popular media such as television. For even though cultural and media studies now conceive of audiences as active meaning-makers at some level, most often adults refer to youth as passive receivers of media messages and images. At the same time, marketers and advertisers profile youth as consumers to be targeted and manipulated into making lifelong commitments to product brands and styles. Relatedly, news coverage reports that children and adolescents are troubled or in trouble, even though those who are engaged in high-risk behaviors are in the statistical minority. Thus, for the most part, adults talk about young people as duped, a demographic, and in danger. Youth are very seldom given opportunities to distinguish themselves as diverse individuals who have thoughtful and intriguing insights into television, trends of commercial culture, or troubles in life. In this book, some very distinct individuals speak for themselves and have illuminating things to say about these matters.

Yet these young people's words alone are not enough. Their words make sense only when they are placed in social and cultural contexts, and when the speakers are located historically, socially, and materially. Marina's, Christopher's, and Samantha's particular situations at home, at school, and with peers have something to do with the words they say and have a great deal to do with what their words mean. And their situations at home, at school, and with peers have something to do with how they interact with television and have a great deal to do with what their TV interactions mean.

Why focus on television when digital communications systems and cyber-networks dominate discussions about life at the beginning of the

twenty-first century? Desktop computers and online systems do not have the reach and scope of television. In the United States, only about half of poor and working-class households have access to desktop computers and online networks; their access often comes through school and work rather than from home. However, poor and working-class households have at least one television set, often more, and frequently have cable and satellite hookups, a videocassette recorder, and TV-based gaming systems. And most young people still watch television for more hours each day than they use desktop computers and online networks (Roberts 2000).

But this book is not about the presence of TV and related technology in young people's houses; it is about young people growing up in television *culture*. Television culture is a phenomenon that exists both on and off the screen, like it or not, although most viewers, like me, understand that the "reality" of on-screen life is different from the reality of off-screen life (Davies 1996; Lembo 2000). When I talk with young people about television, I do so as an anthropologist who wants to understand how young people learn to live in a world where corporate media systems such as television represent, as well as constitute, contemporary existence. How do youths make sense of themselves in a world permeated by corporate media such as TV? How do youths learn how to be successful and powerful members of TV culture? These are focal questions of this study.

How did these questions come about? The first emerged in response to claims about how TV and other commercial media make it difficult for young people to have an authentic identity or a solid sense of self. Such claims are rooted in conventional worries about the nature of TV and about youths' susceptibility to TV messages and images. Scores of studies show that television stories contain stereotypes of all kinds and that both news and entertainment programs present limited points of view. Critics argue that young viewers are seduced by biased and superficial TV realities and so develop selves that are mere collages of style—or disjointed identities without a genuine core or sense of coherence.[4] Such individuals can be easily swayed and do not necessarily have allegiances to a common set of ideas or values. In short, kids are growing up to be flakes and fakes.

If this is the case, it is a problem, because democratic societies value individuals who can think and act for themselves, look critically and reflectively at the world around them, and create change when and

where needed. Democratic citizens are not superficial but substantially informed. They do not shift constantly according to trends; they are loyal to agreed-upon principles of society.

These concerns about youth development, however, are based largely on analyses of media content and forms and on theories about culture and society. They are not based on studies of actual people and their own sense of themselves. Thus, I ask the first question of my research—How do youths make sense of themselves in a world permeated by corporate media such as TV?—to examine how particular young people actually develop in the current environment and to discuss whether, and how, their development is problematic in these ways.

I ask the second question—How do youths learn how to be successful and powerful members of TV culture?—because of the powerful roles commercial television (and other media) systems play in contemporary societies, particularly in the United States, and increasingly the world. Media producers currently operate from within huge megamergered corporate institutions that strive to maintain market control on a global scale.[5] These corporate media have stepped up the pace of advertising and program delivery and have accentuated glossy and sensational styles. Because of steady increases in cable and network programming and consumer "zapping" via remote and pointer controls, they now compete fiercely for consumers' attention—especially that of young consumers. In addition, multitudes of music recordings, video games, box-office movies, rental films, computer software, and online environments both compete with and promote one another. To capture and maintain consumers' attention, and ultimately their product and brand loyalty,[6] creators are forced to deliver media goods that are formulaic and cheap.[7]

Yet the U.S. and world commercial media are more than economic systems of industries, competitive markets, and mass-produced products. Commercial media, especially television media, constitute a public sphere, providing communication spaces in which people of all kinds encounter symbolic realities "out there," or worlds of issues and problems common to many (though not all). The issues and problems that young people encounter in the media lie in the realm of official politics as well as in the domain of everyday life and social relations, which are not without their own sense of politics. That is, news, documentaries, political campaigns, and public-service announcements all present contemporary audiences, young and old, with information and per-

spectives on current issues of the state, policies, and governance—however biased. In addition, situation comedies (sitcoms), dramas, variety shows, advertisements, sports broadcasts, and many other entertainment-based media provide young audiences with stories about who is successful and powerful in the world, and why. Madonna is known to many as a star, media mogul, and provocateur, doing whatever is necessary—given the system—to be popular while advancing the cause of female sexuality (however problematic). Bill Cosby is known as a creator of family programs that show how parents, Black and White, can gain authority over their children, as well as how Blacks can become lawyers, doctors, and other successful professionals in a world that discriminates against non-White and poor people in general. Murphy Brown is known as a TV character who speaks strongly about being an independent, assertive woman while belonging to a team of fictional journalists who strive, albeit comically, to get at "the truth" in the name of freedom of the press. Thus, TV stories, nonfiction and fiction, represent ideas about worlds of power and success.

While encountering TV as a commercial system and as a representation of worlds of power "out there," adolescents are wondering who they are and who they will be. They are intensely engaged in imagining and learning—indeed, "playing with"—what adulthood entails and what they might do in the future as adults. TV culture gives them material for figuring out how to feel powerful as adults in the future. TV culture shows them successes they might strive for, as workers in corporate industries and as citizens of contemporary publics. But exactly how do particular young adolescents come to understand adult worlds? How do different individuals imagine they might become powerful and successful as workers and as citizens? And how do everyday experiences with formulaic, commercially biased TV culture actually figure into young people's imagination and learning about being adults and participating in contemporary public realms? Posing these questions directly to adolescents helps us to arrive at the answers that are the central concern of this book.

I come to this book with my own memories of growing up in TV culture. As a young adolescent girl, I tingled with awe when, standing in our Midwestern suburban living room, I heard the voices of the astronauts as they landed on the moon. I was also devastated by John F. Kennedy's assassination, then Dr. Martin Luther King's, then Robert Kennedy's. The televised Civil Rights demonstrations, Vietnam war

protests, and environmental activism of the 1960s and 1970s galvanized my emerging political awareness.

A variety of programs and personae connect me with trends and styles of a particular era and with my family. I laughed at comedians such as Carol Burnett, Phyllis Diller, Richard Pryor, and the young Bill Cosby. I swooned over Richard Chamberlain, the star of *Dr. Kildare*, and thrilled when I saw The Supremes, The Temptations, and The Beatles perform their music on TV. Science-fiction episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits* gave me the creeps. I watched *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *Laugh-In* while huddled with my sisters; talked to my mom about Victor Borge's being a silly but stunning piano player; and learned about the game of football by watching with my dad. The television of my youth serves as a kind of scrapbook in my mind, connecting me to the larger situations of those days and to the people who shared my time, space, and life.

TV memories remind me that I watched a great deal of television because, as a young adolescent, I was not involved in many extracurricular activities. That came later. Also, when I entered a private school outside my all-White, middle-class neighborhood, I could no longer walk to visit my few friends or play on the school grounds after school. Childhood games were no longer "cool," anyway. As a quiet, introverted girl, I felt awkward socially, and as a tomboy, I did not know what to make of the changes taking place with my body. So besides doing homework and household chores, watching TV at home filled many of my afternoon and evening hours; interacting with TV people and with my family during TV viewing was familiar and comfortable.

My uses of television are not unusual. They are similar to how TV is used sometimes by Marina, Christopher, Samantha, and their peers, even though their situations and circumstances are different from mine. Like these young people, I found meaning in specific TV characters and stories that helped me work through identity dilemmas of my adolescence. Like Marina, who admires Madonna because she perseveres in the face of criticism about her appearance and performances, I looked to TV women who struggled with issues of women's sexuality. Like Christopher, who admires Bill Cosby in his 1980s show because he reinforces the teachings of Christopher's father, I looked to TV figures who complemented what some of the authority figures in my family had to say about getting along in the face of adversity. Like Samantha, who admires *Murphy Brown* because the main character knows how to act

assertively and get public attention, I looked to characters in shows who would help me express my point of view with confidence and assurance.

My background in performance gives me a unique perspective on growing up in TV culture. As a teen, I got involved in theater arts, working behind the scenes as well as on-stage in different capacities and many genres. As a young adult, I joined with a group of friends to create parodies of popular culture. We combined music, comedy, and theater to make fun of everything on TV. Thus, I moved from being an adolescent consumer of television to a young adult producer of TV satires, though what my performance group created on-stage never made it to any mainstream screens. What is pertinent about this, with respect to this study, is that my group members and I were not formally taught to send up TV culture except by TV culture itself.

I bring my informally learned "inside view" of TV culture and my formally acquired academic approaches and methods (see the Appendix) to bear on my understandings of the youths in this study. I found these youths to be aware of the "insides" of TV and critical of TV in their own ways. As noted earlier, for example, Christopher hatched a plan to create his own cable company and adjust the programming to suit viewers like him, revealing his sense of television's supply-and-demand processes. Samantha held a negative view of the behavior of a talk-show host who, to her, seems to be crassly motivated by the TV ratings system, revealing her perception of television as a marketing enterprise rather than as a public service. These young people developed their awareness of TV constructions and TV critiques by watching regularly and talking about television casually with family, friends, and peers. In other words, they have learned about TV culture from TV culture itself.

These young people also have learned how to create TV culture. Sometimes they imagine themselves appearing before others as if on television; sometimes they actually perform before others as if they were a TV image. They can see that the creation of imagery is a valued activity in the United States and in the larger world. Thus, young people's seeing themselves as images or creating themselves as images before an audience should be expected; it is problematic only if their imaginations are not given legitimate forums for expression as well as critical reflection.

Yet self-as-image processes have not replaced processes of self-formation associated with life off the screen. These young people's experiences with real people in their homes, at school, and with peers give them identities that are grounded and solid though sometimes at odds

with each other. For example, Marina proudly identifies herself as the daughter of an immigrant from the Dominican Republic who came to the United States as a single mother to make a better life for her children. Marina's mother, who makes a meager living as a child-care worker, has motivated Marina to make a better life for herself and for her future children, as well. To accomplish this, Marina recognizes that she must finish school, go to college, and establish a career before having children. This means that Marina must go against the traditions established for women of her home country and, instead, adopt the expectations of middle-class America. As will be shown in the Epilogue, Marina feels this struggle of identities most acutely when she goes away to a small private college as a scholarship student. There she is regarded by classmates as "ethnic," and she describes herself as "loud" and "a clown" among her college peers. Yet her mother and sisters back home ask her why she is so quiet and serious, and she worries that she has become "whitewashed."

Most youth have to negotiate multiple senses of self that do not always fit neatly together (Amit-Talai 1995). Perhaps life today and the nature of power and success in TV culture present youth with new kinds of challenges. This book aims to let real young people bring their struggles and challenges, and their ways of negotiating them, to life and discuss what this suggests about learning and development in postmodern times.

1

Coming to Terms with TV Culture and Everyday Learning

[TV is] for when you don't have anything to do, or when you're lonely, or something. It's for you to learn, things and stuff. You learn about the programs and about the plots and stuff, the stories. . . . You have a lot of choices, to choose from to watch . . . you can always turn it on and everything. . . . I usually put it on for light or whatever, just to see, just for company, I don't know. I'm alone, I don't like to leave the TV off, unless I'm getting ready to go to sleep or something. I turn out all the lights. . . and then I leave it on. I go to my room and watch videos. I just like it.

—TeniyaSerita, Puerto Rican American, age 12

TeniyaSerita's comments seem to capture, in a broad sense, some of the complex nature of our experiences with television. TV has multiple uses and a variety of features, and a good deal of "ambivalent pleasure" is associated with this fixture of contemporary life. What exactly is this thing to which she is referring? A reliable companion? A teacher? A warehouse full of stories and "stuff"? A night-light? As almost anyone who watches TV knows, it is all of these things, and it is not, and it is more.

What do these comments mean about TeniyaSerita and youths like her? What is she learning about TV "plots and stuff, the stories"? What kinds of choices does she make when she watches for "company"? Should we be worried about how young adolescents like her are learning and making choices in TV culture?

Coping with a Vexing Commodity

Television is difficult to talk about because it is so much a part of our world that it seems like the air we breathe. Also, because so much has already been said about TV, it is difficult to say anything that is new or that is not obvious, and perhaps inane. Since the decade of television's initial distribution to U.S. consumers, it has been the subject of debates, gossip, hype, research, policymaking, and promotions. Some of this discourse goes undocumented in people's everyday exchanges; some is taking up ample space in libraries, bookstores, private collections, cybermedia, and the daily press; and some is found in the medium itself and in its sibling media, film and radio. Reports about the convergence of technology and media such as TV, computers, and online networks make discussions of "television culture" seem quaint or behind the times. But the history and nature of TV is anything but quaint, and the role it plays in contemporary life is still worth talking about.

Like many types of modern communications technology, television was first widely used as a defense tool.[1] Television technology was useful in that it transmitted images as well as sound immediately from one source to multiple receivers in different locations—like radio with pictures. This capability enhanced the Allied forces' communications and surveillance strategies during World War II. After the war, when industry and government needed to convert to peacetime production and policymaking, debates ensued about the best use of this audiovisual tool. Some argued that the technology should, with government support, be made available for public use and provide educational, civic, and cultural programming. Then TV could be like a "people's university" (Barnouw 1978: 12), giving all citizens access both to the information they need to participate in democracy, such as news and lectures, and to aesthetic experiences that could enrich their lives, such as theater, music, and other arts. Others, however, argued that TV technology should be part of the world of commerce and governed by the laws of the free-enterprise system. Then TV could not only transmit cultural,

civic, and educational fare; it could also provide information about consumer products and services—the staples and symbols of the "good life" in capitalist America.

The arguments over television's place in society then and now are primarily about different senses of the public sphere and the role communications media play, or should play, in creating and upholding that sphere. What forces should be responsible for supporting the principles of democracy and humanity, which hold that all people should have equal opportunities to participate in society and culture and equal access to the means of participation? What constitutes participation, and how should our governmental and economic systems encourage and maintain equal participation? These questions remain important, for in answering them we work out nothing less than our ideas and values associated with freedom, justice, and the pursuit of happiness. And nothing less than young people's dreams and possibilities are at stake.

But back in the late 1940s, commercial forces basically won the struggle over TV's purpose and ownership. Today almost all television systems in the United States are mass-communications industries that operate according to corporate capitalist principles. Even the Public Broadcasting System, which receives government funding, now draws the bulk of its support from corporate foundations and private sources that advertise their image by associating with PBS programming. And the Federal Communications Commission, the only government agency directly involved with the media, has been stripped of its regulatory role and powers largely via massive budget cuts and personnel reductions (Schiller 1989). Thus, over the years, corporate marketers have shaped television as a vehicle for product promotions (Barnouw 1978; Kellner 1990).

Yet how the TV system works as a promotion vehicle is not a simple matter. Corporations are interested in having their products exposed to the largest audiences possible, and they want to buy airtime supporting shows that will be seen by the maximum numbers of viewers. To get such advertising support, programmers need to create and deliver shows that will appeal to the broadest of audience sensibilities. But as programmers compete with one another for advertising support, and as different products have different audience value, programmers vie for airtime when the largest number of target audiences for specific kinds of products are available. Recently, cable stations and new networks have increased the number of airtime choices a viewer can

make; intensive niche marketing via TV has been developed, as well. Encouraged by principles of free enterprise and by democratic ideals in the United States, consumers' having abundant choices is part of the ethos of commercial television (Miller 1988).

In this highly competitive atmosphere, one strategy for "marking off" territory is product differentiation. Using this strategy, programmers have created and developed a wide variety of program categories. Many genres, formats, styles, topics, and events are offered to the viewing public, including (not exhaustively) different kinds of sitcoms, dramas, soap operas, talk shows, music programming, game shows, sports, cartoons, "infomercials," home shopping, comedy–variety, live concerts, documentaries, movies, and news coverage.

Because of this abundance of program types, and because they are competing for advertisers, programmers conduct extensive market research on audiences to figure out when and how to create and sell program products that will appeal to specific masses of consumers at the right times. That is, programmers try to figure out how to "grab the most eyeballs" at any given point in time, better known as earning ratings shares via the Nielsen system.

While marketers and programmers work to get their products delivered to specific mass audiences, commercial programming is single-minded in its underlying objective: to increase audience ratings for its shows and thereby increase advertising revenues. The survival of a program thus depends ultimately on the producers' giving both audiences and advertisers what they want. From this middle-person position, most programmers choose to produce material that is "just entertainment" and not offensive or provocative on overt moral and political levels. As G. Comstock (1980: 20) puts it: "Popularity does not simply rule entertainment—it makes entertainment the principal dimension of commercial television." Even many contemporary news and documentary programs have adopted the styles and tone of entertainment, giving us so-called info-tainment and edu-tainment programs.

Entertainment material is imbued with mainstream ideologies because, to appeal to the most people without offending them, the ideas and values of programs need to align generally with those of mainstream audiences. In corporate capitalist terms, this means aligning with audiences who have disposable incomes and thus fall into the middle and upper classes. And although mainstream audiences as markets have power as the consumers of TV programming, their power extends only

as far as their remote controls and spending decisions. The institutions of TV production and distribution are more powerful in that they set the agendas and define the categories or frameworks for the programming that audiences receive and choose (Gitlin 1985 [1983]; Hall 1980; Morley 1989; Schiller 1989). Thus, the ideas and values of corporate capitalist commerce inform the structures and practices of television production and delivery and shape the kinds of symbolic material that programmers create and transmit.

Learning and Developing in Postmodern Times

Many adults think that TV shapes young people's values and ideas in a negative manner by telling the wrong stories about culture and by teaching bad manners (see, for example, Postman 1985). In the past, movies, comics, and novels were seen in this way (Barker 1984; Blumer 1933; Buckingham 2000); now toys, video games, computers, and online environments are the subject of these concerns (Clark 1998; Kinder 1999; Sefton-Green 1998; Steinberg and Kincheloe 1997). Most people would prefer that children and youths learn about culture and how to be part of it from their real lives and from real people.

Everyday practices, rituals, and institutional activities—such as family dinners, school-ground play, television viewing, and e-mail messaging—do organize and shape people's sense of culture (Pitman et al. 1989; Wolcott 1982). But people do not learn all that culture presents to them, and different individuals do not learn from culture in the same way (Eisenhart 1995; Geertz 1983). Learning in TV culture is no different. Individuals in different situations have access to different kinds of television, and they make different decisions about what to view. They also vary in how they participate in viewing rituals and in how they interpret their viewing experiences (Ang 1990; Lembo 1997; McRobbie 1992; Morley 1992).

Viewers interpret all media from within a structure of identifications, such as gender, age group, family, class, race or ethnicity, and nation (Hartley 1983). When eleven-year-old Kelly watches *Beverly Hills 90210*, she is "inside" her multiple identities. She uses her experiences as a White, middle-class girl living in New York City and attending a small alternative middle school to compare with the shows' White, upper-middle-class girls and boys living in a famously rich Southern California suburb and attending a large, traditional high school.

However, gender, race and ethnicity, class, and other identities should not be seen as fixed categories (Buckingham 1993; Lembo 2000). Kelly might have values and ideas that are similar to those of the characters on *Beverly Hills 90210* (and perhaps those of the actors portraying them) because they are all White and live in large U.S. metropolitan areas. But the particular ways in which Kelly and the *90210* characters experience being White urban-dwellers cannot be known through these labels alone. They live in different regions with different climates, have different personalities, and come from different families and communities with different occupations, structures, and backgrounds. And because the *90210* characters are fictional, their experiences are constructed to be dramatically different from the everyday life Kelly knows.

My own work regards labels such as gender, race and ethnicity, and class as aspects of identity projects. "Identity projects" refers to the essential work in which a self engages to make sense of her or his particular social positions and life circumstances (Mead 1962 [1934]). As babies grow, their self-concept grows progressively more complex because they encounter more and different people and their social worlds (Berger and Luckman 1967 [1966]). Identity projects are lifelong and have age-related challenges and resolutions (Erikson 1980 [1959]; Honess and Yardley 1987; Winnicott 1990 [1971]). The identities discussed in this study are complex and changing by nature; they are fixed only by virtue of my reporting on them in this stationary document.

Young adolescents are faced with identity projects that are particular to their biological age (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 1984) and social status in the United States. Going through puberty, they have to negotiate their sense of sexual identity, which is linked strongly to gender identity. Young adolescents in the United States also have to negotiate a sense of themselves as "almost adults," fashioning identities of the future as well as of the past (Feldman and Elliot, 1990; Hansen 1993). Youths have a sense that their own self-composition can move forward if: 1) they have learned from others through past experiences that their way of being in the world is somehow successful or powerful; and 2) their version of reality gives them powerful yet attainable visions of futures for themselves.

Power Relations and New Challenges

Identity projects are linked to power relations, or the dynamics of authority and control, which are an intrinsic aspect of all social rela-

tionships and institutional activities (Hall 1980). No matter what their situation or circumstances, young people are learning about where power lies and the nature of power. They are sorting out their own power within the realities of their lives and are dreaming of the power they hope to acquire as they move forward.

In the past several decades, feminists, civil-rights groups, and other social critics have challenged the inequities and injustices of power that are demonstrated through sexism, racism, and classism, among others. These challenges have brought about both ideological and practical changes in people's interactions and in their expectations. For example, schools such as the one in this study concentrate specifically on correcting gender biases by examining sexism in literature and history and by encouraging girls and boys to participate equally in traditionally gender-segregated activities, such as sports. Compared to females in past generations, more girls can now expect to work in the paid workforce and to put off child-rearing—if they choose to have children at all—until later in their lives. Yet, although such changes have occurred, dominant forces manage to maintain the status quo and create backlashes against such changes (Faludi 1991).

At the same time, changes in global economies, international politics, and technological capabilities have destabilized many societies' traditions. Corporate conglomerates move goods, services, and whole factories into and out of countries, looking for new markets and higher profits, practices that call into question national and regional loyalties and job security for local entrepreneurs and workers (Schiller 1989). The worldwide spread of mass media and computer communications brings more and more distant cultures into virtual contact with one another on a daily, if not hourly, basis—interactions that can foster new perspectives as well as alter the integrity of local customs and values.

Some argue that these kinds of changes have created decentered sensibilities, fragmented identities, and an overall sense of social insecurity—all signs of postmodernism (Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991). Modernist notions define the developed self as coherent around, and unified by, a central set of values and ideas provided by religion, family, local community, and civic ideals (Jagtenberg 1994; McRobbie 1992). In a postmodern world, selves are unmoored, responsive to the unpredictability of new situations and to the sensational gratification of consumerism and popular culture (Jameson 1991 [1983]). Indeed, advertising and commercialism are seen as part and parcel of such sensibilities.

Products and services are marketed as the fulfillment of human needs for social acceptance, desirability, and achievement (Kellner 1990). Ads suggest that using the right hair-care products will bring love and romance and that wearing the right brand of clothing will lead to popularity and success. Entertainment programs are fashioned as spectacularly pleasing packages for such consumer goods, reflecting corporate capitalists' intention to sell goods and services endlessly and repeatedly. Theoretically, people who construct themselves with and through commercial media and consumer products are superficial, ever-changing sensation-seekers.

Yet, people who are highly engaged with media and consumer culture may perceive their own identities as multiple and adaptive but not necessarily as unstable or fragmented (Lembo 1997; Turkle 1995). Perhaps people like TeniyaSerita appreciate all of their choices in television culture but also involve themselves thoroughly in traditions of home, community, and school. What is actually going on with real people? Do youths themselves feel decentered or solid? How do they experience the flux of social power relations, shifts in political economies, and globalized communication? What do they imagine for themselves in the future, growing up in a world saturated with the messages and images of corporate capitalist systems? To answer these questions, we need more than theoretical speculation; we need grounded insights.

Everyday Spaces of Young Adolescent Time

What young people "do" with and learn from television culture depends on who they are, their social situations and economic circumstances, and their interpretations of life experiences, which includes TV. We need to describe many contexts and levels of activity to understand how they select and use, find meaning and pleasure in, and learn from everyday television. This is a task I take up extensively in the individual studies that are at the core of this book. To understand these in-depth case studies in relation to broader scenarios, this section details young New York adolescents' general experiences of home, school, peer life, and television.

The Worlds of Home

"There are a lot of people, a lot of crime, a lot of buildings, a lot of pollution, it's loud." So TeniyaSerita, age 12, describes her hometown, New York City. It is one of the most heavily populated cities in the United

States, densely packed into five boroughs filled with tall structures. Yet how polluted, "loud," and crime-ridden is the city? The presence of many people and many industries in New York City results in a lot of noxious emissions and waste, and the busy streets and thoroughfares of the "city that never sleeps" can be noisy, sometimes day and night. And crime does have a presence there, especially in those areas that are most economically depressed. In some neighborhoods, lives are endangered or lost because of organized crime and drug trafficking.

But these problems are only part of the city's reality, and sometimes they are overblown and turned into a "stereotype," as Samantha suggested. New York City is one of the nation's major centers of cultural production and creativity in the arts; it teems with theaters, museums, galleries, libraries, and media agencies. The number of festivals, concerts, performances, exhibitions, and special events that happen each day boggles the mind. New York City is also home to people of almost every nationality and ethnicity on the planet. This demographic fact can be seen and heard at many public cultural activities and while riding subways, walking the streets, sitting in classrooms, playing in parks, and shopping at the markets and stores. As one of the renowned gateways into the land of the American dream, New York City invites immigrants. Everyday multicultural encounters give New York youths a wide range of norms, conventions, and ideas that they can compare with those they have acquired from their own diverse families.

Like other New Yorkers, adolescents such as Christopher recognize that "some parts [of New York] are cleaner and safer" than others. They know that some neighborhoods are better protected, with building doormen or private security guards. They see this when they take day trips with their schools or when their families have the resources to make excursions to museums, parks, and beaches, or to visit relatives and friends in other neighborhoods. To accomplish such excursions, these young adolescents and their families can use one of the most extensive public-transportation networks in the United States. According to Samantha, who has relatives in the suburbs, "it's easier to travel" in the city.

Samantha and her peers might be called streetwise, as they are generally savvy about their environment. They know how to use the subway and bus systems to get around. They know not to walk on certain streets, because there might be "a lot of people around there who drink and stuff, at night," TeniyaSerita says. And they know to stay on streets

with a lot of stores, "so, let's say someone's following you or something, you [can] go in."

These New Yorkers also know that the city is not the only location that has advantages and disadvantages. Some have lived in other places, in conditions that are better or worse, economically and politically. Many of the immigrant families came to New York to escape extremely impoverished circumstances or oppressive political situations. And whether they are immigrants or relocated citizens, they may have left extended family or friends whom they miss and about whom they worry because of the social and economic problems in those places.

The neighborhoods these young people inhabit are mostly adjacent to or near the school they attend, although some of the students come from neighborhoods farther away (see the section "The Worlds of School"). These home communities consist of large buildings that contain rental units and, perhaps, some co-op units for purchase. Almost none of the students live in separate structures known as houses. The buildings and streets they call home are often residential, although those that are located on busier thoroughfares may offer food markets, delicatessens, pizza parlors, sundry stores, or other small-scale businesses at the ground level.

Most New York City apartments are small, especially those in price ranges that working-class and poor families can afford. Most of the young adolescents in this study live in such dwellings, because their parents' jobs (clerical work, food services, maintenance, security, child care, teaching, transportation, delivery, construction, and other labor positions) are lower in status than the professional and managerial positions held by the well-heeled folk of the area—and depicted glamorously on television. Many of these youths' family incomes qualify them for subsidies such as free school lunches, food stamps, Medicaid, and—seldom but sometimes—welfare income. This means that the furnishings and decor in their homes are basic, although they do not lack personal flourishes that express their tastes and backgrounds.

Living in small dwellings with no common areas besides halls and stairways, these young adolescents and their families often turn to local parks, playgrounds, eateries, shops, and street corners to talk and play with friends, relatives, and local folk. However, their choice of locations for these activities depends on weather, finances, and various policies.

First, gathering in any of the available outdoor locations is constrained by weather, which in the New York region can include rain, as

well as extreme cold, snow, and sometimes ice storms during the winter months, and oppressive heat and humidity in the summer months. Second, gathering in eateries and shops assumes that some money will be spent; many of these families economize by avoiding eating out and shopping unless necessary or for a special occasions. Of course, they might know the eatery or shop owners and workers—or they might even *be* the owners or workers—in which case friends and family "hanging out" in such places may be encouraged or, at least, tolerated. Third, the policies of small local businesses and of city parks and playgrounds affect who may use these locations to gather at various times, and how the locations may be used. I will elaborate on this later, in the section on peers and leisure, as young people are often most affected by such policies. For example, adolescents are often discouraged from hanging out in stores, as they are seen to be potential troublemakers who may drive away customers (Chin 1993).

The Worlds of School

Like most eleven-to-fourteen year olds, the young adolescents in this study spent about a third of their day at school. They all attended the same alternative public middle school, which had opened five months before the study began (see Appendix). Alternative Middle School (AMS) was a small charter-school project sharing space with a traditional elementary school in a large, old public-school building. Many aspects of the building structure were in disrepair, and the furnishings and materials were an eclectic mix of scavenged and donated items, as one finds in many public schools that use old buildings and that do not have adequate budgets for maintenance and materials.

By design, AMS included a multicultural group of sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders. Students had to submit applications to attend. The faculty's selection criteria gave priority to those groups—mainly Blacks and Latinos—who are at a disadvantage in the private schools and public "magnet-school" systems in New York City.[2] The faculty hoped to counter the system of privilege that they knew benefited White and some Asian students (Ogbu 1985) the most. AMS had sixty students in the first year of my study (1990–91) and ninety students in the second year (1991–92). African and Caribbean Americans, Puerto Rican and Dominican Americans, and White European Americans were almost evenly represented. There was just a handful of Asian Americans.[3] In both years, the proportion of girls and boys was almost equal.

The faculty was also diverse. The director was a White woman who had worked for many years as a teacher in the public schools and was familiar with the education-reform movements that emphasized small-scale schools and theme- and project-based curricula. Six faculty members were female and four were male; they had varying degrees of experience and different areas of specialization, including language arts, social studies, science, mathematics, and the visual and performing arts. Two of the women were African American, two of the women were Latina, and two of the men were Latino.

In this and other ways, AMS expressed a progressive and innovative philosophy. Having been influenced by the successes of model programs in New York City at the time, the director and her diverse faculty and staff had developed the curriculum to be pertinent and relevant for young adolescents. In social studies, students were looking at the history of North American peoples—indigenous, immigrant, and enslaved. In language arts, students were writing their own autobiographies and reading fiction and nonfiction stories about young people with diverse backgrounds and situations. In science, students were studying the workings of their own body systems. With grants and donations, the school had purchased a handful of low-end computers for students to learn word-processing, and two portable videocameras to encourage the students to document events audiovisually, as the faculty believed that this technology would assist the students' success in the contemporary environment.

All students attended small-group advisories in which ten to twelve students met with the same faculty member four times a week to discuss social issues and problems, whether immediate or global. For many of the students, this was an important and valuable aspect of their school experience. Marina, for example, said that AMS was better than the school she had attended the previous year, "'cause it's, like, less kids, and all the teachers there . . . make a big deal out of everything. Like, if there's an argument, they spend like about three hours to figure it out, just talking it out." Likewise, Samantha said that at other schools, she had felt as if she was "just . . . a pupil, [not] actually a person. You were just like a member of something." But at AMS, "it's different, because it's a lot smaller, and it seems like people care more."

As the name indicates, middle school (also called "junior high" in some systems) falls between elementary and secondary school in the United States, and many changes occur in this phase. Students start changing classrooms for different courses instead of staying in one room