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Between Good and Ghetto

AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS AND INNER-CITY VIOLENCE

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RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS
New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London

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90
V5
J66
2010

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Jones, Nikki.
Between good and ghetto : African American girls and inner city violence / Nikki Jones.
p. cm.—(Rutgers series in childhood studies)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8135-4614-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-8135-4615-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Inner cities—United States. 2. African American girls—Social conditions. 3. Children and violence—United States.
I. Title.
HT164.U6J66 2010
305.23089'96073—dc22 2009000768

A British Cataloging-in-Publication record for this book is available from the British Library.

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Manufactured in the United States of America

With gratitude for the stories shared and hope for the future "safe"—that is, once she is somehow insulated from the immediate threat—she may use other resources, including situational avoidance, to manage a violent relationship. Attempts to invert the power dynamic that characterizes an abusive relationship, even when such attempts are only marginally successful, allow some young women to regain a sense of power and control in a setting where they often feel as though they have very little of either.

Conclusion

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CRISIS

MRS. CARTER IS A MIDDLE-AGED MOTHER whose teenaged son, a burly young high school football player, was in a fight in his public Philadelphia high school. Her son's troubles, however, are dwarfed by those of his teenaged sister, who recently gave birth to a baby boy. Mrs. Carter is especially concerned with getting her daughter to realize that mothers "have certain responsibilities." She tells her daughter that "being a mother is doing what you got to do," which often requires some sacrifice. Mrs. Carter recalls the sacrifices she made for her own children. "I've had all types of jobs," she tells me. "I've been called out of my name [verbally disrespected] many times," she says as she recounts some of her struggles to maintain her dignity at work. She encountered racism when she worked at Philadelphia's naval base, and as a McDonald's employee, she "had people cuss me out. Retail sales. Telemarketing. People get mad, cuss you out." Now that her children are almost grown, Mrs. Carter is "going back to school for medical billing," she says. She is looking forward to a job that involves little or no face-to-face interaction with others. "Now, I'll be done with people," she tells me. "I'll be behind the curtain."

Mrs. Carter's desire to be "behind the curtain," to retreat to the back regions of social life, represents a local knowledge about her own vulnerability in public settings and in certain interpersonal interactions. Her disclosure also reveals that using the strategy of situational avoidance is likely to extend beyond the adolescent years for poor, urban Black women. Her wish for a sort of protective invisibility is one shared by many Black women who have spent years fighting for the most fundamental sort of social respect. Black women who, like Mrs. Carter, spend their working lives in service jobs often are vulnerable to strangers' casual surveillance, inappropriate criticisms, and unregulated anger. Mrs. Carter tells her daughter that this disrespect for Black women in general will make the life of a young Black mother that much harder. "I told her she's Black and a woman, you got it double."

For women like Mrs. Carter, the accumulated investment in developing effective situated survival strategies to navigate the "double burden" or "triple oppression"[1] of urban life eventually comes to resemble a larger, seemingly all encompassing survival project that includes battles at work, home, school, and in the neighborhood. This project can be exhausting for many women: "I'm tired," Mrs. Carter tells me near the end of our talk. "I'm out . . . I'm out of words." "I'm tired" is a mantra recited by many mothers who, like Mrs. Carter, are facing old and new challenges as they try to make their own lives, and raise their children and grandchildren. What Mrs. Carter hopes to pass on to her daughter is a lesson that is familiar to the many women—mothers, grandmothers, aunties, and othermothers—who are trying to raise teenaged girls in troubled and sometimes violent inner-city neighborhoods: urban, adolescent girls must understand that they will face unique challenges not only because they live in the inner city, but also because they must function in a world that is often harder for Black people in general and for poor, Black women in particular.[2]

Black Femininity, Strength, and Survival

Historically, the material circumstances of poor, Black women's lives have required a commitment to raising girls to become strong women who can withstand the sorts of challenges imagined by Mrs. Carter. The narratives of the teenaged girls in this book reflect these locally held beliefs about the value of women's "strength," which has been a "historical force of female power" for Black women (Collins 2004, 193–199). This embrace and expression of female strength, which sometimes contrasts sharply with traditional conceptions of White, middle-class femininity and Black respectability, were considered necessary for Black women's survival and for the survival of the Black community as a whole.[3] African American inner-city girls who live in distressed and isolated neighborhoods or attend racially segregated schools may not fully appreciate the multiple oppressions they are likely to face once they transition from girlhood to womanhood; however, they and their caretakers are quite familiar with the immediate challenges, burdens, and dilemmas that accompany coming of age in today's inner city. In contrast to the relatively privileged lives of many suburban adolescents, inner-city girls, their parents, and caretakers must make complicated choices about safety and survival at very early ages.[4] In many ways, the teenaged girls featured in this book are no less concerned with survival than were strong Black women and girls in earlier periods. However, in today's inner city, where poverty is deeply entrenched, and the culture of the code organizes much of social life, what a girl believes she has to do to survive has changed.

In distressed inner-city neighborhoods, adolescent girls must actively work to develop ways to manage the various forms of violence that they may encounter in their everyday lives, ranging from interpersonal battles at school, to fights with their baby's father or intimate partners, threats of sexual assault, and the unpredictable violence associated with the drug trade. Like their male peers, many adolescent girls recognize that reputation, respect, and retaliation—the three R's of the code of the street—organize their social world. Teenaged girls like DeLisha, Danielle, and Shante appreciate the importance of maintaining a tough front and of demonstrating nerve in social interactions. They accept as a fact of life that "sometimes you got to fight."[5] For these girls, adolescent fears of violating traditional expectations regarding what it means to be feminine are at times trumped by concerns for personal safety and survival.

The stories of girls in this book also reveal a deep concern with survival projects that specifically reflect their class, race, and physical position within the inner city.[6] The use of aggression and violence by young women in the inner city is sometimes modulated by girls' desires to meet expectations of appropriate femininity—perceptions that are deeply racialized. For example, a teenaged girl's desire to become a particular *type* of girl or woman—a good or pretty girl, for example, instead of a girl whom others evaluate as ghetto—can influence the degree to which she willingly takes part in physical battles. Girls' attempts to reconcile the gendered dilemmas that emerge from these situated survival projects sometimes reflect and sometimes resist traditional, dominant views of femininity and locally based expectations of Black feminine respectability.

Inner-city girls are cognizant of the code of the street as a system of accountability in the same way they understand gender expectations. African American, inner-city girls must reconcile the dilemmas and contradictions they encounter while navigating potentially dangerous settings. Girls like Takeya and Danielle, for example, are committed to behaving in ways that others evaluate as good, yet they also come to believe that they must present a tough demeanor and be ready to fight, if necessary. At the same time, these girls will rely heavily on strategies of situational avoidance or relational isolation to minimize their involvement in potential interpersonal battles. Girls with reputations as fighters work the code of the street in ways that directly and often deliberately challenge both traditional and local expectations regarding femininity. Girl fighters may have realized early on that the value placed on their particular set of

physical attributes may grant them a status as an outsider, and they may use this identity as a resource to challenge the relational and geographical restrictions that good girls often place on themselves. Some girls may embrace the identity of a "ghetto chick"—for example, she may be ready to fight "all the time"—in order to ensure freedom, mobility, and protection in a setting where she knows that her safety is never guaranteed.

In developing survival strategies that work for them, these girls embrace, challenge, reinforce, reflect, and contradict elements of mainstream and local masculinity *and* femininity. Their adolescent lives are characterized by this *fluidity* between and within the competing and controlling expectations of good and ghetto. The accounts provided by Terrie, a self-disclosed violent person, and Danielle, a self-disclosed punk, and girls like them, reveal that African American teenaged girls coming of age in distressed urban areas are engaged in a racialized, classed, and gendered form of code-switching (Anderson 1999). From this negotiation of overlapping and, at times, contradictory survival and gender projects emerges new forms of femininity that encourage and even allow girls to use physical aggression when appropriate without sacrificing any and all claims to a respectable feminine identity. Learning when and how to move back and forth between good *and* ghetto is essential to their struggle for survival in the most troubled inner-city neighborhoods.

The structural and cultural context of inner-city life, including the rules and expectations embedded in the code of the street, exacerbates the problem of intimate violence in the lives of inner-city girls. Young men with few resources to enact mainstream notions of masculinity outside of their intimate relations find broad cultural acceptance for keeping the young women in their lives subservient with force, if necessary. Amber's story illustrates how the desire to be loved and to make a family outweighs her concern for ending a violent relationship. Her story also illuminates the pressing challenges facing young mothers who possess little social and economic resources beyond what is provided by their baby's father. Girls like Amber, who live each day at the intersection of multiple oppressions, are also likely to feel a deep sense of powerlessness after extended periods of abuse and manipulation. Amber eventually exhausted herself in her attempts to manage her violent relationship with Marvin. She did not gain a sense of power until she was able to use the resources of the criminal justice system, which stands ready to police and punish poor, Black men, to keep Marvin in *his* place. Amber's embrace of a power that is rooted in dominance continues a cycle of dominance and intimate violence that is likely to further marginalize Marvin from mainstream society and increase Amber's vulnerability to Marvin's abuse.

Ultimately, it is clear that strength remains a source of power for teenaged girls coming of age in poor, Black inner-city neighborhoods; however, it does so with a contradictory twist since using aggression or violence to demonstrate one's strength can seriously undermine the collective well-being of a community. Generally, the teenaged girls in this book did not (yet) couple strength with dominance. To the extent that they are representative, this offers some hope that structural and cultural interventions can reduce the increasing numbers of girls who enter hospitals or correctional facilities as a result of interpersonal violence. Without such interventions, the experience of inner-city girls may eventually become indistinguishable from those of their male counterparts, who live and all too often die by the code of the street.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CRISIS

Neither the wisdom that I gained from listening closely to the stories of the girls I met nor the methodological approach I used in this study provides an ideal basis for formulating broad policy recommendations. Still, my research does establish the necessity and the urgency of directing the attention of both scholars and policymakers to what I describe as the other side of the crisis. To be sure, poor, young, urban, Black men face a difficult time in America; however, many of the experiences that shape their lives shape the lives of women and girls, too. The survival stories of young, Black girls in urban areas reveal their strength and wisdom, but also their particular vulnerabilities. In order to fully appreciate their struggles, and the strategies girls use to overcome these challenges, we must resist attempts to frame these girls exclusively in the context of sexual deviancy, delinquency, or criminology. This type of approach sweeps away the dignity, humanity, and importance of girls' and women's lives. It is essential that feminist scholars, particularly Black feminist scholars, resist allowing studies of teenaged mothers or gang girls, which are largely grounded in the sociology of deviance and/or criminology literatures, to stand in for the lives of all poor, Black women and girls.[7] The lives of urban, adolescent girls are heavily influenced by the violence of gang life and the drug trade, which are deeply entrenched in the neighborhoods in which they live; however, most teenaged girls in inner-city settings are not gang girls or delinquents. This distinction is subtle yet significant in understanding how urban, adolescent girls navigate inner-city life.

Joyce Ladner noted the danger of this skewed perspective over thirty-five years ago, in *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* ([1971] 1995), her now classic study of girls in a St. Louis housing project. Her warning has gone largely unheeded. Today, the sociological and criminological literature continues to pay little attention to young Black women's experience with conflict and interpersonal violence, except in the context of their *participation* in criminalized, deviant, or delinquent activities. Those few contemporary studies that do examine the experiences of everyday girls growing up in urban areas tend to find that violence deeply informs the lives of boys and girls, and that gender plays an important role in shaping adolescents' experience with violence.

This book contributes to this developing literature on African American, inner-city girls' experiences with violence outside of purely criminalized or delinquent contexts. Placing young Black women and girls at the center of more research projects in urban sociology would also help to correct what is ultimately a dangerously misinformed and potentially dehumanizing academic tendency to talk about race *primarily* through studies of crime, delinquency, or deviance. This book extends Ladner's tradition of inquiry by starting with a basic assumption that inner-city young women and girls are normal, albeit poorer, and thus more vulnerable than their middle-class counterparts. To be sure, the circumstances of life for the girls whose stories are featured in this book differ greatly from those of the girls described in *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*. Poor, Black girls today are coming of age under economic and social conditions that are far harsher than those experienced by past generations.[8] We have much to learn from their struggle for survival in these settings.

As I talked with and listened to young inner-city residents, I saw the heavy burden they carry reflected in their eyes and in the way they carried themselves. I heard it in their voices. Why is it that inner-city girls must struggle so hard simply to survive? What can we do to make everyday life easier? When I asked my respondents what help they thought they needed, they responded with pleas that highlight how structural circumstances shape their experiences. These young people saw clearly that the violence in their lives was related, in some way, to their own economic and social isolation. The recent national catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina dramatically revealed the need for serious domestic policy to reduce the economic isolation of the nation's poorest citizens from mainstream American life and opportunities. There is a serious need for occupational opportunities in the inner city that provide steady work. A job is more than a paycheck; it is also critical to the development of one's sense of self-worth and connection to the rest of the world. Industry has effectively abandoned a population of workers of color in many large cities across the country. We are in need of national and local efforts that bring work back to these areas and to the lives of these inner-city residents who are struggling not only to survive but also to maintain their sense of dignity.

The existence of decent work opportunities and improved housing conditions would likely influence the culture of inner-city neighborhoods in a way that could reduce the lethal violence that currently characterizes much of inner-city life. Such opportunities would make the easy money image of the drug trade less appealing to the young people who are recruited into the game every year. Their involvement in low-level drug trafficking assures the fact that many of these young men, and increasingly girls and women, will have contacts with the juvenile or criminal justice system, which will further isolate them from mainstream work and positive life opportunities.

In addition to providing attractive alternatives for inner-city adolescents who might otherwise be recruited to sell drugs, we must end the war on drugs, which is effectively a war on young Black men and, increasingly women. I believe that with the wisdom of hindsight, more than one scholar will conclude that the tough-on-crime drug laws of the late-twentieth century were uncivilized and crudely veiled versions of the Black Codes that sold Black men, women, and children into the convict lease system in the early part of the twentieth century. This war with no winners has snared great numbers of young people, channeled them into secure detention facilities, jails, and prisons, and then spit them back into the most distressed urban neighborhoods in the country. This cycling into and out of the harsh culture of dominance and violence that exists behind prison walls has disrupted and damaged family and social networks, and has endangered the lives of all inner-city residents. In addition to reducing the likelihood that neighborhood street corners will become battle grounds, ending the war on drugs might also improve the culture of city police departments and encourage police officers to interact with residents of hyper-criminalized neighborhoods in a way that ensures that all city residents—regardless of income status or skin color—receive the protection that they are entitled to from institutions like the criminal justice system.

The structural changes outlined above would improve the everyday experiences and life chances of the inner-city girls and women that I interviewed and encountered during my three years of field research in Philadelphia. These changes would likely have broad, positive effects on both men and women. Yet, there are also certain changes within the politics and perspectives of the Black community—across lines of class—that must occur in order to reduce the burden of the struggle for poor, Black girls today. First, Black leaders who highlight and politicize the crisis of the young, Black male must give *equal* and *simultaneous* attention to the struggles of young, Black girls. We must focus our attention on these girls now. Scholarly and political work must expand to encompass the other side of the crisis—the dismal life chances of poor, urban, Black girls. Ignoring the plight of these young residents of the inner city wastes time, energy, and resources while simultaneously reinforcing the sort of gender politics that have isolated Black women in the past, to the detriment of the entire Black community.

The lack of respect accorded to young Black women—from media representations of "video hos" to everyday interpersonal interactions in which Black girls are "called out their name"—is a fundamental problem that must be central to any discussion about the crisis facing young people of color today. Mainstream representations of the Black female body, which urban girls and boys begin absorbing at very young ages, suggest that Black women are objects, available for White and Black men to use in whatever ways they choose. Each time I share my research findings with other Black women—from academic colleagues to my own hair stylists, who work in neighborhoods similar to those described here—they respond with stories of their own about young, Black girls who have been severely abused, sometimes with at least one immediate family member's knowledge. With every new story, my own frustration over what is allowed to happen to Black girls in general, and to poor, Black girls in particular, soars. These girls are made more vulnerable because of their race, age, and economic status. It is time that mainstream Black leaders—especially men—confront these issues with the outrage, conviction, and intolerance that the violation of Black women and girls demands.

There is one more aspect of the other side of the crisis that must be acknowledged, namely the skin-color hierarchy that continues to inform not only White Americans' perceptions of Black women and girls, but also Black people's perceptions about good and bad Black women. Colorism, notably the privileging of light skin and other related characteristics, has lingered since the end of slavery and continues to permeate girls' sense of self-worth in a way that divides them from one another.[9] Colorism is one of the most dehumanizing and divisive elements of contemporary Black life and it limits the quality of relationships among adolescent, Black girls.

I have found hope and comfort in the strength, perseverance, and wisdom evident among the poor, young, Black women and girls who shared their stories with me. At the same time, I feel a deep sense of frustration and even fear for these girls. Many are so deeply committed to a belief system that they think is protective, but that I know is also potentially destructive. The survivor mentality characteristic of many girls reflects a disturbing sense of individualism that diverges from Black women's experiences in earlier periods—a lack of interest in a collective survival and an almost obsessive concern with one's own survival. This mentality reflects and reproduces divisive racialized gender dynamics. It encourages young women to trust no one. Such a perspective, especially if it is developed early in life, has the potential to shape girls' relationships into early adulthood and beyond.

I also feel an anger that I know is familiar to these girls, and to other Black women across the country, regardless of their class position or the shade of their skin. Despite all of the advances made over the last century, survival remains a struggle for many Black women in America, but especially for poor, Black inner-city girls. Life will continue to be a struggle for these girls until we come together and fight back with the lessons learned from their stories. If I have learned anything from my years of researching and writing this book, it is that the battle for respect, dignity, and positive life chances is not one these girls should have to fight on their own.

APPENDIX: A REFLECTION ON FIELD RESEARCH AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

"THINGS ARE NOT GOING TO CHANGE," Tracey says firmly from the front seat of Stephanie's emerald green Honda Civic sedan. Tracey is only twenty-two, but her sense of maturity makes her seem older. She has made similar pronouncements during the three years I have known her, but this time she is exhausted and unusually emphatic, and both emotions come through clearly in this proclamation. Stephanie, who until recently was Tracey's boss, but is now just her friend, counters, as she has done many times before, "But Nikki can represent it to them in their language." Almost immediately, Tracey releases a short puff of air through her lips, rolls her eyes upward, and turns toward the window on her right. In the past, I have freely inserted myself into this familiar exchange. Today, I listen intently, but in silence. I do not want to wake Tracey's two-year-old daughter, who has fallen asleep on my shoulder. I am also tired. As we pull up to the university, where Stephanie is going to drop me off before delivering Tracey and her daughter to their West Philadelphia home, Tracey reaches a decision. "I'm out," she says, relinquishing her part in a struggle that she no longer considers her own: "Ya'll will have me end up fighting, and they'd [the project directors] be like, 'Look, I told you we was right.'" Tracey makes this final declaration as she, Stephanie, and I are on our way back from a shared lunch at a chain restaurant several miles away from the inner-city neighborhoods where we had spent so many hours together, meeting with young people who had been shot, stabbed, or injured, either during a fight in school or on the block. We had visited young people in their homes and spent time together at activities sponsored by the hospital-based violence intervention and reduction project (VRP) that served as my entrée into the lives of the adolescent girls and boys in this book.

Memories of one of those sponsored activities, a picnic, float back. Quite clearly, I recall watching a teenaged boy who sat quietly, trying, failing, and trying once again to make a bandage meant to cover a fresh knife wound stick to his skin. The wound was his reward for backing up his brother during a neighborhood fight. After observing the young man's futile efforts, I sought out a fresh bandage from an attendant at the community stables facility that was hosting the event. Many of the young people attending the picnic had never been to such a place before. Their initially tentative and then more boisterous behavior reflected both their apprehension in new settings and their acuity for quickly adapting to new spaces. When I returned with the bandage, Sadiq, the young man with the knife wound, smiled appreciatively before carefully removing the old bandage and placing the new one over the hole in his leg. Tracey, meanwhile, stood in the distance, counseling a shy young woman who, like many other young women before her, had adopted Tracey as her "big sister." At times, the level of these girls' need overwhelmed Tracey, physically and emotionally. In addition to her commitment to her position as a program counselor, she was raising her own family, completing her undergraduate degree, and planning her wedding with the father of her young daughter and son. Sometimes, Tracey's frustration bubbled to the surface quickly, as it did in the car that fall afternoon.

In many ways, the final scene in the car encapsulates the theoretical and practical dilemmas I confronted while conducting field research with and on the Black community—an amorphous, diverse, and sometimes divided community—of

which I consider myself a member. Stephanie's response to Tracey—"Nikki can represent it to them in their language"—suggests that I had adequately proven my ability to "code-switch" (Anderson 1999) and my ultimate loyalty to their side (see Becker 1967). Yet, although each of us identified as a Black woman, Tracey, Stephanie, and I represented three different sets of life experiences. Our experiences overlapped and diverged at the intersections of class, skin color, and sexuality. Over the course of three years, however, we were able to find a common ground that was defined at least in part by our identification and experience as Black women.

But what does racial solidarity mean in our post–Civil Rights, post-apartheid, post-colonial world? Race scholar Howard Winant writes that today the concept of race is "more problematic than ever before"; racial identities in particular are "less solid and ineffable" than in earlier periods and they feature a "certain flexibility and fungibility" that is, Winant argues, unique to our era (2006, 987). Like other Black researchers who came before me—I was repeatedly inspired by Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro*, Drake and Cayton's *Black Metropolis*, Joyce Ladner's *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, and Elijah Anderson's trilogy of ethnographic works—I found out that it takes more than skin color to guarantee solidarity. It also takes more than the right shade of skin color to earn the right to represent others. The urgency and significance of these points ebbed and flowed throughout my research and caused me alternating periods of anxiety and confidence familiar to many field researchers, regardless of race, gender, class, or sexuality.

Some of the questions that concerned me most during this time and still concern me today are those concerning representation: Who am I to tell these stories about poor, Black girls? What rights did/do I have to represent their lives? Which stories do I tell and which do I leave out? What powers and problems characterize my attempt to represent these girls—and, in turn, myself—to others? In this appendix, I reflect critically on my experience as a light-skinned Black woman and doctoral candidate in her mid-twenties who was studying girls' fights. I focus this reflection on what I think of as the authenticity tests that I encountered during the first few months of the project, when much of my time was spent familiarizing myself with a group of intervention counselors who would facilitate my initial access to the teenaged girls and boys who are featured in this book. I reflect on the various challenges that emerged during my interactions with these counselors. I consider, as well, my relationship to the academy and the racialized and gendered dilemmas that I encountered, from the process of getting in to writing up this research.

On Getting In, Authenticity, and Representation

In almost any sort of ethnographic endeavor, the field researcher occupies a strange position. She belongs and doesn't belong at the same time, and necessarily so. She is the "Simmelian stranger," that peculiar individual who is in the group, but not fully part of it; she is here today but may be gone tomorrow (Simmel 1971, 143). In occupying this position, the field researcher is open to certain confessions from her respondents, confidences that likely would not have been shared if the researcher had been a permanent member of the group. In my research, these confessional-like sessions sometimes ended in tears, as the strong, Black woman before me broke down. These episodes revealed what other girls and women I encountered and interviewed may not have stated explicitly on their own or in response to a survey question: even the toughest Black women and girls endure a tremendous amount of stress. They are, as I heard repeatedly over the years, "tired."

It was not only my position as a stranger that allowed or encouraged my respondents to open up to me in this way. In a

racialized society such as ours, the stranger's skin color (and gender, class, sexual identity, and so on) influences and adds meaning to every social interaction. A sense of commonality, even trust, must be present before a person is likely to expose her or his vulnerability to a relative stranger, that is, to reveal what otherwise lingers in the back regions of one's life. How can such a trust develop in a matter of moments? How can this trust emerge in a setting where even the *idea* of trust is so tenuous? At these moments, it seemed to me, skin color and gender symbolized trust, connection, and solidarity. The Black women and girls I interviewed seemed to recognize that I was positioned in between their world and Whiteness—the *de facto* race of many of the social service institutions in their lives—and the combination of that distance and closeness, as signified by skin color and gender, helped to create a space where some teenaged girls felt they could share far more than they normally would with a person they did not know very well. It is here, in this shared intimacy of the field research experience, where I developed my perspective as an observant participant in—and of—the struggle that teenaged girls confronted in their everyday lives (Anderson 2001).[1]

The Intervention Team

Before gaining access to the backstage moments of inner-city girls' lives, I first had to negotiate and pass the many tests presented by members of the violence reduction program's intervention counseling team. Understanding the unique organizational and raced position of the team members requires first understanding something about the makeup and mission of the VRP. The program was developed by a group of doctors in response to their and their colleagues' frustration with the revolving door phenomenon: the constant flow of victims of youth violence in and out of the hospital's emergency rooms.

Overall, the program took a behavioral modification approach, which was then implemented by a team of intervention counselors. In the winter of 2001, when I made my initial contact, the intervention team had three members: Stephanie, Tracey, and Diana. Both Stephanie, who was the team supervisor, and Tracey are African American women who grew up in inner-city neighborhoods similar to where they were now working as VRP staff. Stephanie was in her late twenties and had worked in the city's community centers for several years. She lived in an integrated suburb north of the city. Her older sister and young nephew lived in South Philadelphia, a target area for the VRP, and she visited them there often. Tracey was in her early twenties and lived in West Philadelphia. She could walk to some of the VRP participants' homes to conduct interviews with these young people. Diana was thirty years old, a White woman from suburban Ohio who was (she admitted) unfamiliar with Philadelphia's inner-city neighborhoods and the life experiences of the youth she counseled. During the course of the project, other members joined the team as intervention counselors. Jimmy, a Puerto Rican man in his late twenties who had worked as a counselor in inner-city communities for the previous eight years, joined in the summer of 2001. Vince, an Asian American man in his early twenties who was raised in Philadelphia, and Syreeta, an African American woman in her early twenties who grew up in Philadelphia's Carver projects, also joined the team. Other than Diana, all members of the intervention counseling team were non-White and quite familiar with Philadelphia's inner-city neighborhoods.

In 2001, the VRP was housed in a small office in the city's children's hospital. The hospital was only steps away from the university where I attended graduate classes in sociology and criminology. The second-floor office was small and the three desks made the space seem especially crowded. During the first few weeks of the project, I visited the office regularly. During

one of these visits, I asked Stephanie to describe how young people entered the project and to explain the design of the intervention. During our conversation, Stephanie began to talk about what she perceived as a fundamental problem with the intervention, namely that the tools designed to measure the risk of subsequent violence did not "speak to the population." When I asked her what she meant by that, she cited the importance of understanding both the local meanings used by young people and the range of social cues that might emerge during an interview. Subtle cues, such as a young person's choice of words or how she or he carried her- or himself, Stephanie emphasized, could provide a wealth of information, if the counselor was properly attuned. By the same token, key understandings about violence in these young people's lives were likely to be missed if these types of social cues went unheeded.

How do people learn about the significance of these informal codes, I wondered. "Can you train someone to be aware?" I asked Stephanie. In her opinion, this was not knowledge that could be gleaned simply from reading books. In fact, sometimes, book knowledge could interfere with an accurate assessment of what was going on in the lives of young people. Stephanie concluded from her experience working with kids in inner-city community centers that the best workers were often those with the least formal education. Personal experience with life in the inner city trumped formal education nearly every time.

Authenticity Tests: "She's Not Diana!"

During my first few months of field research, I discovered that the counselors often used perceived differences between street and book knowledge to distinguish outsiders from insiders on the intervention team. Team members also used other members' ability to demonstrate their "experience" to draw lines between insiders and outsiders. Since I was a relative stranger to the group, the intervention counselors, especially Tracey, spent a good deal of energy trying to categorize me. To them, I represented a special case: a Ph.D. student at an Ivy League university who was also a Black woman. In their efforts to place me, Tracey and others paid attention to how I spoke, the type of clothes I wore, and how I reacted to stories told about other counselors or members of the research team. Tracey's retelling of an encounter Diana, the only White counselor on the project, had had in the field, for example, helped her to evaluate my level of experience with the people in Philadelphia's inner-city neighborhoods.

I heard the story during a field visit in West Philadelphia. Tracey asked me if I had had a chance to go on a visit with Diana. I told her that I hadn't, but that I planned to accompany her soon. Tracey predicted that Diana would like me: "She'll be so happy [to have company]—she gets so nervous." When I asked Tracey what she meant, she responded with the following story. At the end of a recent visit Diana had made to the home of a program participant, the mother had walked Diana to the front door, said good-bye, and then added, "Be careful." "Be careful" or "be safe" are standard farewells used by people in the neighborhood. These types of farewells implicitly acknowledge the potential threats of the street, but they are not intended as warnings of immediate danger. Diana, however, took this good-bye as a warning. "You know how people say, 'Be careful' when you leave their house? Well, she took them seriously." According to Tracey, when Diana came back to the office, she told the other counselors that this interaction had made her very nervous. Next time she went on a visit, Diana announced, Stephanie or Tracey had to come with her. I laughed as I listened to the story.

In recounting this anecdote, Tracey made clear Diana's difference from the other members of the team. In addition, with the comment that I would "know how people say, 'Be careful,'" Tracey signaled that she assumed that I had access to the same type of knowledge that she did, and that I too would find Diana's concern comic. By laughing at the story, I verified this assumption. If I had not shared in Tracey's understanding of the situation, I would have seemed as ignorant of local life as Diana. If Tracey had concluded that I was more like Diana, and that I lacked the real-life experience the counselors valued over the book knowledge implied by my academic pedigree, then I would have likely been distanced from the group. In that case, my access to backstage conversations, neighborhood settings, and the young people whose stories would inform my project would have been quite limited.

During these first few months, each interaction with Tracey was a potential test of my familiarity with inner-city life. One such test of my street knowledge quickly became a running joke that strengthened my relationship with the team, especially Stephanie and Tracey. This test took place in a car when Tracey, Stephanie, Jimmy, and I were on the way to a home visit. During the ride, Tracey began to joke about how she was not going to be able to pay her rent that month, and so she planned to throw a house party. She would charge admission at the door to raise money for the rent. She paused before getting into the details of her plan and turned toward the back seat to address me. Using the deliberate speech of someone translating a foreign language, she began to explain to me what she meant by house party. Before she finished her definition, I interrupted, exclaiming, "I know what a goddamned house party is!" Everyone erupted in laughter. In a momentary lull, Tracey apologized for her assumption of my ignorance. Stephanie announced, "She's not Diana!" With obvious glee, Jimmy said, "Oh, we are having too much fun." Someone suggested I become an intervention counselor and we continued to laugh and joke about this until we arrived at the scheduled home visit.

My knowing the meaning of the term house party revealed information about me that was particularly important to these counselors. Furthermore, that I would take offense (albeit jokingly) at the presumption that I did not know the term provided the intervention counselors in the car with a clue about who I really was in terms of class and experience, and was not. In their eyes, I was a Black woman who possessed the book knowledge valued by the doctors who developed the project, but also the street knowledge valued by the intervention counselors. I knew enough to be on their side of the dividing line between insiders and outsiders. Furthermore, I was certainly not Diana, who represented the uninformed outsider whose limited understanding of life on the streets had been gained in a classroom setting. The significance of passing this test was not lost on me. During the first year and a half of the study, the intervention counseling team facilitated many of my field visits. They would call me to coordinate visits to young people, introduce me to various neighborhoods, and help me gain access to other research sites. If the counselors had not trusted me, or if they had found it difficult to interact with me, I would have been forced to end the study not long after I had begun it.

In the weeks following the house party moment, the counselors became increasingly comfortable around me. They would often joke that I should write a book about them, and not about the young people in the project. An additional signal of my inclusion in the group was that I became subject to the same face-to-face teasing team members traded with one another. In these back-and-forth exchanges, frequently initiated by Tracey, class markers emerged as signs of within-group difference. For instance, Tracey would sometimes point to my Kenneth Cole shoes or leather backpack and announce to the group that I must be secretly rich. She also made frequent references to my ability to use and understand big words. Once, while preparing for a workshop on violence intervention strategies, Tracey remarked to Stephanie and Jimmy, "It'll be good if Nikki

comes. She can use all of her big words." This teasing revealed both my inclusion in the group and my distance—while I was a welcome member of the group, I was not necessarily one of them.

Repeatedly submitting to and passing these authenticity tests eventually had the desired cumulative effect. By the end of that first summer on the violence reduction project, I was accepted as part of the intervention team. I went on visits regularly; participated in project activities, including picnics, field trips, and holiday parties; and helped out in any other ways that seemed useful. I had little trouble coordinating visits with the counselors, and they were becoming more interested in helping me. At one point, when I was unable to make a visit, Tracey said the next day, "We missed you yesterday. That would have been a good visit for you." As the counselors grew increasingly comfortable with me, they also took a greater interest in what I was doing. During the early months of the project, when I was hanging out, observing, Tracey would often ask, "What are you doing?" At times I simply told her that I was documenting the intervention process. I usually added that I was also especially interested in what was going on with the young women and girls in the neighborhoods. Stephanie, Tracey, and I would often have conversations about what I was finding. We talked over lunch, during ride-alongs, as we rode the bus, or while we walked in the neighborhoods. These discussions helped to illuminate various aspects of the context of violence. The conversations also reinforced the counselors' general sense that other people involved with the project were unfamiliar with the context in which they were asking the intervention counselors to intervene. Both Stephanie and Tracey seemed to assume that my unique credentials—not simply my skin color but also my proven ability to pass their tests—would allow me to translate life on the streets to those who possessed more book knowledge and less street knowledge.

ON DECENCY AND DIVERSITY

On that afternoon in the car when Tracey concluded, "Things are not going to change," both she and I were a bit tired of this representational dance. While I had proven my solidarity with her and her worldview, she did not necessarily believe that I would be able to effectively challenge or change the seemingly intractable ignorance of others who had much more power than she did. Tracey firmly believed that time and resources were regularly wasted because other people were unable or unwilling to recognize the diversity that existed within the inner-city community. "They think that all kids are alike," was how she frequently summed up her frustration. Once, as she and I were driving through her West Philadelphia neighborhood, returning from a farewell lunch for one of the intervention counselors, she addressed this subject at greater length. I often made use of times like this to test my working hypotheses about how young people negotiate conflict and violence in the inner-city setting. I suspect that Tracey always knew what I was doing, but she would listen patiently and offer her assessments or critiques, largely without reservation.

That afternoon, I offered the following observation for Tracey's consideration: "It seems like there is as a tension between the directors of this research project and the intervention counselors." At first, Tracey makes no response. Her exasperation is unmistakable, but the enormity of her frustration leaves her momentarily tongue-tied. Finally, she bursts out loudly, "All of these kids are not the same!" It is not until we near her home that Tracey finally reveals that the "real" reason the doctors cannot understand the existence of diversity in the population is, and "she hates to say the word," prejudice. The same lack of an in-depth understanding also informs how they think about the violence that occurs in the neighborhoods. I ask Tracey if she thinks the doctors' misperceptions represent a fundamental lack of understanding about fights, in particular, about their seriousness and their consequences. "Oh yes! You get into a fight and they think your life is over. And don't get into one fight and have come from a single-parent family—then you going to be a serial killer."

Tracey and I continue to talk about prejudice and stereotyping as we approach her house. "Like that street there," I say, pointing to a typical block off Baltimore Avenue as a way to test Tracey's assertions, "they will think that everyone on that block is the same, when actually there is a diversity of people there." Tracey nods in silent affirmation.

"If you know," I add, "you know."

"And the same is true in the suburbs," she notes before challenging the necessity of insider knowledge as a basis for knowing one's fellow human beings: "Even if you don't know, you *should* know."

It is this inability of others to understand and to view Black people as something other than a monolithic mass of similarly situated human beings that frustrated Tracey from the beginning of the project to this day in the car. This frustration, of course, is quite familiar to Black scholars. Patricia Hill Collins describes what may be the roots of Tracey's frustration in *Black Sexual Politics* (2004): "Racial segregation, however, has created large numbers of white Americans who lack sustained, personal experience with African Americans. This group routinely must be convinced of Black humanity, a task that requires that they jettison racial stereotypes and learn to see and value Blacks as individuals" (2004, 15).

Although Tracey's knowledge of the diversity in the target population is informed by her understanding of her own community, observers less directly involved have reached similar conclusions. Nearly every rigorous ethnographic observation of the ghetto, slum, or inner-city community has recognized the existence of social systems based on hierarchical classification schemes. Three of the most notable discussions of the local hierarchies of Black communities are found in Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro*, Drake and Cayton's *Black Metropolis*, and Anderson's *Code of the Street*. Du Bois, writing more than a hundred years ago, observed:

> There is always a strong tendency on the part of the community to consider the negroes as composing one practically homogenous mass. This view has of course a certain justification: the people of Negro descent in this land have had a common history, suffer to-day common disabilities, and contribute to one general set of social problems. And yet if the foregoing statistics have emphasized any one fact it is that wide variations in antecedents, wealth, intelligence, and general efficiency have already been differentiated within this group . . . and there is no surer way of misunderstanding the Negro or being misunderstood by him than by ignoring manifest differences of condition and power in the 40,000 black people of Philadelphia. ([1899] 1996, 310)

As Du Bois suggests, class divisions within the Black community are not mere abstractions created by observers; local residents also acknowledge these distinctions.[2] In his study of contemporary Philadelphia's inner-city neighborhoods, Anderson found similarly important distinctions between Black people in Philadelphia nearly a century after Du Bois's discovery.

Those of us with academic training or a healthy sociological imagination would likely trace Tracey's frustration to larger patterns of social segregation and racism. Tracey's appreciation of the diversity in the inner-city community, however, is not informed by this kind of "book knowledge." Her worldview is rooted in her lived experience—certainly, she knows where she is located in the social typology of the inner city—and her deep belief in the humanity of all people. After three years of work with the VRP, she is no longer sure that anyone is adequately positioned to make others understand the diversity of the community she serves. In the following section, I turn from Tracey's frustration with the challenges of representation to my own challenges in "enlightening" others.

(Re)telling Stories: From Ignorance to Enlightenment

"People remember stories," is advice that field researcher Howard Becker once passed along during a visit to a graduate seminar I attended. This insight deeply informs how I represent my work in public presentations and in writing. "What is the story?" I now ask my students who are conducting field research projects. The stories are important, I tell them. Yet, in the academy, just like in the rest of social life, we tell our ethnographic tales in a social context that is informed by race, gender, class, and power. In recent years, who gets to tell these stories and how they are told has started to receive critical attention.[3] As a graduate student, and now as an assistant professor, I have wrestled with the racialized gender politics that determines who gets to tell stories about poor, Black people and how their stories are told. I began to think critically about the structure of the ethnographic tale after I began receiving comments from others about how I told my story about inner-city girls and violence. Several people commented that I represented the girls' story in such a matter-of-fact way. As I reflected on these comments and continued to read the most popular ethnographies in the field, I began to see that some people seemed to be most struck by what was *missing* from my story.

In an attempt to explain the inner workings of one group of people to another, many contemporary ethnographic texts begin from a point of ignorance instead of from a point of understanding or commonality. This ignorance may be real or, more likely (I hope), feigned in an attempt to connect with a certain audience. For example, otherwise progressive scholars may ask questions about poor women's mothering choices in an attempt to hook the more conservative policy makers and voters among us. While this may be an effective storytelling strategy (the continuing attacks on poor mothers and women of color make this presumed effectiveness questionable, however), assuming a veil of ignorance seems to result in an end almost diametrically opposed to what most liberal or progressive researchers intend their work to achieve. Many scholars aim to move their readers from a state of ignorance to one of enlightenment with the hope that once enlightenment is reached policymakers or voters or other benevolent stakeholders will do the right thing. However, adopting an ideological framework, especially one that is inherently racist and misogynistic, in an attempt to enlighten those with the power to effect change can—and, I would argue, often does—have the effect of making the others under study *more* unintelligible than they ever really were. Such a storytelling strategy may produce sympathy for a particular group; it is much less likely to evoke empathy—a deep and shared understanding of the lived experiences of others.

Mitchell Duneier describes the style of storytelling that I allude to here in his award-winning *Slim's Table*: "Sociology, like many disciplines today, is constituted of some scholars who tend to function as politically correct stereotype guardians. They say, 'You are guilty of carrying around an unenlightened, negative image of blacks. But you can depend upon me, in my innocence and enlightenment, to set you straight'" (1992, 138). Duneier traces his own racial enlightenment to classic field studies of Black life (he cites Drake and Cayton's *Black Metropolis*, Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner*, Ulf Hannerz's *Soulside*, and Elijah Anderson's *A Place on the Corner* and *Streetwise*, among others). "In discussing the urban ethnographic tradition," he writes, "I immediately recall how much more enlightened I felt after some of my own gross stereotypes about blacks were transcended through an encounter with these works" (139). Duneier's honest disclosure and critique reveal the importance of interrogating the assumptions and perspectives that we bring to our research. I came to my research with a set of assumptions and presumptions that influenced how I went about my work and, ultimately, how I represented this work. Some of these initial assumptions were challenged. Yet, it is important to distinguish between everyday assumptions and feigned or willful ignorance. In light of Duneier's analysis, I cannot honestly say that I began my research from either ignorance or innocence.

In contrast to the perspective apparent in many popular ethnographic works on Black populations, I began this research confident that the humanity of Black people was not a subject for debate. Like Tracey, I know of the diversity within the Black community and I have some appreciation of the lived implications of these differences. Patricia Hill Collins makes a similar point in *Black Sexual Politics*, where she writes, "For me, evidence for the humanity of Black people lies in the beauty of Black individualism. In all of my work, this has been *my starting point, not my destination*" (emphasis mine; 2004, 15).

I am sure that well-intentioned scholars think that they are indeed breaking down stereotypes and humanizing their subjects by telling ethnographic tales in this way, that is, by translating the lives of "others" in a way that makes them understandable to some other—*and this is the real paradox*—better educated and more privileged yet still ignorant group of people. However, I wonder if in taking this approach, scholars participate in the kind of dehumanization they are trying to challenge. One could argue, for example, that taking up the task of proving one group's humanity to another group is just as dehumanizing as questioning that claim to humanity at all. Ultimately, what such an approach tells us is the all too familiar story about the position and politics of a particular researcher and her public audience. It does not deliver the story.

"TELL IT"

In the end, it is the story and the stories that matter. Most field researchers get to the story in a similar way. They become interested in a particular group of people; they spend time with the group, listening, hanging out, and taking copious field notes. They systematically review and analyze the notes and gradually develop a theory about what is happening in a particular setting or with a particular group of people. After years of this work, the story finally emerges—or is pulled—from this mound of data. Yet, discovering the story is only half of the work. You must also tell it.[4]

A final challenge that I want to consider briefly here is the politics—disciplinary, ideological, and personal—of *where* stories get told. One of the biggest challenges in telling this story about poor, Black girls' use of aggression and violence was the preexisting context in which the story would be heard—one in which hypermasculinized images of Black girls were already in circulation. There was little space within urban sociology to tell this tale because much of that literature is concerned with the experience of young, Black men.[5] Arguably, more writing on Black women and girls is available in the criminological literature than in sociology. Yet, I did not encounter the girls in this study in a delinquent or criminal context. Where then, I wondered, would I be able to tell their stories?

This challenge was highlighted in a set of reviewers' comments I received from a journal that is sensitive to feminist writings and research on gender. The reviewers recommended that I revise and resubmit this piece and instructed me to resituate my discussion squarely in the *criminological* literature on gender and crime, *instead* of in the urban sociology of Elijah Anderson or the Black feminist thought of Patricia Hill Collins. As I read these instructions I was somewhat discouraged to learn that in spite of the advances made by women and feminists in the

discipline, the same challenges that Joyce Ladner encountered decades ago in writing her study of poor, Black girls in St. Louis remained. In her introduction to the paperback edition of *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, "A Twenty-five-Year Retrospective," she explains, "[W]riting *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* was my attempt to reconceptualize the 'deviance/pathology' model of black family life and black women and see them as resourceful, normal women who were simply trying to cope with some of the harsher conditions of life. What other scholars had traditionally viewed as weaknesses and pathologies, I chose to view as strength and coping strategies in dealing with stress" (1995, xii). In the end, I resisted (and continue to resist) others' attempts to label the girls in this study as offenders, victims, delinquents, or criminals, primarily because the evidence does not support such claims. Girls' lives are not contained in these labels. Furthermore, the language that girls use to describe themselves holds far more descriptive and explanatory power than the labels that others would force upon them. These girls are good girls, pretty girls, sometimes violent girls, and fighters who are deeply involved in a struggle for survival.

My efforts to find ways to tell this story my way sometimes leave me as frustrated and tired as Tracey was in the car that afternoon. The challenges of representation are as real in the academy as they are in the field. In both settings we must pass tests and make the choices—personal, political, and ideological—that will determine if and how the story gets told.