

chapter one

don't believe the hype

*The minute they see me, fear me
I'm the epitome—a public enemy
Used, abused, without clues
I refused to blow a fuse
They even had it on the news
Don't believe the hype
Don't believe the hype.*

—PUBLIC ENEMY, “DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE”

Soon after I began fieldwork at Rosa Parks Elementary School, one of the adults, an African American man, pointed to a black boy who walked by us in the hallway.¹ “That one has a jail-cell with his name on it,” he told me. We were looking at a ten-year-old, barely four feet tall, whose frail body was shrouded in baggy pants and a hooded sweatshirt. The boy, Lamar, passed with the careful tread of someone who was in no hurry to get where he was going. He was on his way to the Punishing Room of the school. As he glanced quickly toward and then away from us, the image of the figure of Tupac Shakur on the poster advertising the movie *Juice* flashed into my mind. I suppose it was the combination of the hooded sweatshirt, the guarded expression in his eyes, and what my companion had just said that reminded me of the face on the film poster that stared at me from billboards and sidings all over town.

I was shocked that judgment and sentence had been passed on this child so matter-of-factly by a member of the school staff. But by the end of the school year, I had begun to suspect that a prison cell might

1. This research was assisted by an award from the Social Science Research Council through funding provided by the Rockefeller Foundation. The names of the city, school, and individuals in this ethnography are fictitious in order to preserve the anonymity of participants.

indeed have a place in Lamar's future. What I observed at Rosa Parks during more than three years of fieldwork in the school, heard from the boy himself, from his teachers, from his mother, made it clear that just as children were tracked into futures as doctors, scientists, engineers, word processors, and fast-food workers, there were also tracks for some children, predominantly African American and male, that led to prison. This book tells the story of the making of these bad boys, not by members of the criminal justice system on street corners, or in shopping malls, or video arcades, but in and by school, through punishment. It is an account of the power of institutions to create, shape, and regulate social identities.

Unfortunately, Lamar's journey is not an isolated event, but traces a disturbing pattern of African American male footsteps out of classrooms, down hallways, and into disciplinary spaces throughout the school day in contemporary America. Though African American boys made up only one-quarter of the student body at Rosa Parks, they accounted for nearly half the number of students sent to the Punishing Room for major and minor misdeeds in 1991–92. Three-quarters of those suspended that year were boys, and, of those, four-fifths were African American.² In the course of my study it became clear that school labeling practices and the exercise of rules operated as part of a hidden curriculum to marginalize and isolate black male youth in disciplinary spaces and brand them as criminally inclined.

But trouble is not only a site of regulation and stigmatization. Under certain conditions it can also be a powerful occasion for identification and recognition. This study investigates this aspect of punishment through an exploration of the meaning of school rules and the interpretation of trouble from the youth's perspective. What does it mean to hear adults say that you are bound for jail and to understand

2. Punishment resulted in suspension 20 percent of the time. Records show that in 1991–92, 250 students, or almost half of the children at Rosa Parks School, were sent to the Punishing Room by adults for breaking school rules, for a total of 1,252 journeys. This figure is based on my count of referral forms kept on file in the Punishing Room. However, it by no means represents the total number of students referred by teachers for discipline. I observed a number of instances where children came into the Punishing Room but the problem was settled by the student specialist on the spot and no paperwork was generated. This seemed especially likely to occur when the adult referring the child had written an informal note rather than on the official referral form, when a parent did not have to be called, or when the infraction was judged by the student specialist to be insignificant. So it is likely that a much larger number of children were sent to the Punishing Room over the year but no record was made as a result of the visit.

that the future predicted for you is “doing time” inside prison walls? What does school trouble mean under such deleterious circumstances? How does a ten-year-old black boy fashion a sense of self within this context? Children like Lamar are not just innocent victims of arbitrary acts; like other kids, he probably talks out of turn, argues with teachers, uses profanities, brings contraband to school. However, I will argue, the meaning and consequences of these acts for young black males like himself are different, highly charged with racial and gender significance with scarring effects on adult life chances.

The pattern of punishment that emerges from the Rosa Parks data is not unique. Recent studies in Michigan, Minnesota, California, and Ohio reveal a similar pattern.³ In the public schools of Oakland, California, for example, suspensions disproportionately involved African American males, while in Michigan schools, where corporal punishment is still permitted, blacks were more than five times more likely to be hit by school adults than were whites. In the Cincinnati schools, black students were twice as likely to end up in the in-house suspension room—popularly known as the “dungeon”—and an overwhelming proportion of them were male.⁴ In an ominous parallel to Cincinnati’s dungeon, disciplinary space at Rosa Parks is designated the “Jailhouse.”

The School and Neighborhood

I was initiated to Rosa Parks Elementary School in 1989 as a member of an evaluation team for a new intervention program for children diagnosed as “at-risk” of failing in school. The program, Partners at Learning Skills (PALS), included in-school counseling, after-school tutoring and recreation, evening and weekend workshops for parents, and in-

3. “Survey: Schools Suspend Blacks More,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 14, 1988, 4A; Joan Richardson, “Study Puts Michigan 6th in Student Suspensions,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 21, 1990, 1A; Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, *Student Suspension and Expulsion: Report to the Legislature* (St. Paul: Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, 1996); Commission for Positive Change in the Oakland Public Schools, *Keeping Children in Schools: Sounding the Alarm on Suspensions* (Oakland, Calif.: The Commission, 1992), 1; and John D. Hull, “Do Teachers Punish according to Race?” *Time*, April 4, 1994, 30–31.

4. In Oakland, while 28 percent of students in the system were African American males, they accounted for 53 percent of the suspensions. See note 3 for racial imbalance in corporal punishment in Michigan schools (“Survey: Schools Suspend Blacks More”), and the racial discipline gap in Cincinnati (Hull, “Do Teachers Punish?”).

service training for teachers. It was just one of hundreds that had been started in schools and communities throughout the United States in response to the erosion of funding and services to urban public schools that had occurred over the previous decade.

The children participating in PALS had been selected by a committee of teachers, school administrators, and a counselor. I was told that the selection committee had had a very difficult time choosing the first group of thirty children since more than three times that number had been proposed by classroom teachers. One of the most difficult questions facing the selection committee, it was said, was whether to choose pupils who might benefit from extra help or to select those who were, in the words of one of the school administrators, “unsalvageable” and on whom precious resources would be wasted. The selection committee could not agree, so they compromised and included both types.

The first time I saw the entire group of children in PALS, they were in the school library taking a pencil-and-paper test designed to measure self-esteem. That was when I first became aware of a disturbing fact: all the children except one were African American, and of those 90 percent were males.⁵ I quickly became aware that what was surprising and problematic for me appeared to be taken for granted by the others. No one at the school seemed surprised that the vast majority of children defined as “at-risk” of failing academically, of being future school dropouts, were mostly black and male. My own puzzle over how this raced and gendered pattern had come into being lead me to conduct an in-depth study through participant observation at the Rosa Parks School over a three-and-a-half year period from January 1990 to May 1993.

Rosa Parks School is the largest of five intermediate schools (grades 4 through 6) in the school district of Arcadia, a medium-sized city on the West Coast. The city is best known as the home of a large public university whose prestige and reputation has attracted students and faculty from all over the world. Arcadia has operated a complex plan for school desegregation since 1968 that involves citywide busing to produce a racial/ethnic and socioeconomic mix in its schools. Students attending Rosa Parks come from a population where race, household type, and annual income are skewed into three types of neighborhood

5. The one who was not black had a Hispanic surname.

I have called Heartland, Midland, and the Highlands.⁶ Each day the buses bring children, the majority of whom are white, from upper-middle-class professional families in the relatively affluent Midland and the wealthy Highlands to Rosa Parks School, where they join the kids from the predominantly low-income African American families living in the Heartland neighborhood surrounding the school.⁷

The racial balance targeted by the Arcadia desegregation program has never been actually attained because of the “white flight” from the public schools that followed the implementation of the desegregation plan in 1968. The percentage of white students in the K–12 grades of the city’s schools declined from 60 percent to 30 percent between 1960 and 1993.⁸ For a city with a reputation for being one of the most liberal communities in the country, Arcadia has one of the highest percentages of children attending private schools in the region.⁹ Many of the white children who attend private or parochial elementary schools eventually return to attend the Arcadia public high school, where classes are de facto segregated as the result of an elaborate tracking system.

6. Children are bused in from areas of the city that are vastly different in terms of their social and economic characteristics. I compared 1990 census data from two of the most affluent census tracts from which children are bused (Midland and the Highlands) to data from the tract in which the school is located (Heartland). Heartland has a median family income of \$20,192, while Midland has a median family income of \$66,234, and that of the Highlands is \$97,315. Heartland has the highest percentage of blacks and the lowest percentage of whites, while the reverse is true for the Highlands. Race is therefore an excellent predictor of whether a child comes from a family with limited resources. Children in Heartland are also more likely to be living in female-headed households than those bused in. Sixty-one percent of children under eighteen years in Heartland live in female-headed households, compared with 27 percent for Midland and 8 percent for the Highlands. This is significant because female-headed households in the United States are more likely to be poverty households than married-couple households. This is true of Heartland, where women head three-quarters of the families living below the poverty level. Households headed by females in Heartland had a mean income of \$15,150 per year, compared to \$38,306 for those of married couples. In the Highlands, however, the mean income of female-headed households is \$54,388, and those headed by married couples averaged \$153,828 annually.

7. About half of the kids in the school are eligible for the subsidized lunch program, while just over one-third come from families that receive AFDC. Almost all of these are neighborhood kids.

8. Arcadia Schools Enrichment Office, “Comparative Racial Census of the Arcadia School District, Grade K–12,” 1991.

9. Diana Walsh, “Money Isn’t the Only Factor in School Choice,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 7, 1993, 13.

At the time of my study approximately one-half of the Rosa Parks student body was black and one-third was white. Of the remaining students, 10 percent were Asian American, 4 percent Hispanic, and 8 percent were classified as Other. The racial composition of the teaching staff, however, had changed little since desegregation, continuing to be predominately white and female.¹⁰

Rosa Parks School itself is far from being one of the run-down, resource-poor facilities documented in several recent accounts of urban schools.¹¹ The freshly painted two-story building and the asphalt playground occupies a full city block. Beautiful old pine trees stand on either side of the walkway leading up to a wide stone porch set in front of the main entrance to the school. The building faces onto a grassy lawn that is green for a short time in the spring and brown by the end of the summer when the school year begins. After school, children play football on the grass or hang around on the wide stone porch.

Inside the front door I am always struck by the calm atmosphere. The hallways are wide, clean, and lined by bulletin boards displaying children's work. The classrooms are filled with light from big windows. These are not rooms that speak of the bare necessities. Rooms are adorned with books, plants, animals, computers, games. Even so, teachers reminisce about better times in the school when the availability of basic school supplies could be taken for granted, when there was a school nurse, when the playground was open for recreation in the afternoons.

Nor is the neighborhood in which the school stands dilapidated or run-down. There is a mix of small, neat, single-family dwellings with older rambling wood-frame houses converted into multiple family units. Some are shabby, some are newly renovated. A few 1960s vintage apartment buildings, home to many of the poorest families, are interspersed throughout the neighborhood.

In spite of the quiet, ordinary feeling of its surroundings, Rosa Parks School is located in the heart of a major drug-trafficking area in the city. The buying and selling of drugs, the symbolic presence of urban poverty, is signaled through the signposts on a number of street

10. There were twenty white, nine African American, and three Asian American teachers, of whom only three classroom teachers were male, one of whom was African American.

11. See, for example, Alex Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), and Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

corners that warn that police are watching and that the car license numbers of people buying drugs are being recorded. The area accounted for ten of the city's fourteen murders; one-half of the reported rapes; about a third of the robberies, and almost a half of the aggravated assaults in the city, according to 1991 statistics from the Arcadia Police Department.¹²

Doing Fieldwork

Statistics about school trouble and punishment provide a map that delineates a raced and gendered pattern of who gets punished in school and present the big picture of a disturbing phenomenon, but they can tell us very little about the actual processes that give rise to this configuration. So, my fieldwork was designed to explore these processes. Through a combination of participant observation at the school and a wide range of interviews and conversations with kids and adults, I examined the beliefs, the social relationships, and the everyday practices that give rise to a pattern in which the kids who are sent to jailhouses and dungeons in school systems across the United States are disproportionately black and male.

As a participant observer, I roamed the hallways before, during, and after school, hung out in the student cafeteria and the teachers' lounge at lunchtime, attended assemblies, wandered around the playground during recess. I sat in on classes and in the school library. I also tutored in the PALS after-school program.

During my second year, I began sitting in on Mrs. Daly's sixth-grade class. I had chosen this room because Horace, the boy who I was tutoring after school, was in the class.¹³ The first few visits, I spent most of my time sitting at a worktable, quietly watching what was going on. But very soon, with Mrs. Daly's encouragement, I began participating in the regular classroom activities. I often worked with small groups of kids who needed help. I observed Horace and his friends "in action" and also got to know several of the African American girls in the class who were considered "challenges" and who also spent time in the Punishing Room. I accompanied the group on several field trips, including

12. Arcadia Police Department statistics as reported in a PALS document.

13. There were twenty-seven children, ten girls and seventeen boys, in Mrs. Daly's class. Fifteen of the children were African American, six were white, three were Hispanic, and three were of Asian descent.

a three-day camping trip, the sixth-grade picnic at the end of the school year, and the orientation at the junior high school to which some of the kids would be transferring the following year.

But the most important site of all was observing in what I came to call the Punishing Room as well as in the other spaces connected with the school's discipline system. I would not have discovered the existence of the Punishing Room on my own. Some of the boys whom I was observing in Mrs. Daly's class led me to it because it was a regular stop on their passage through the day. I had already begun following them into more familiar places: their classroom, the playground, the cafeteria. I had begun to sift through their files in the school office and had learned about their scores on reading and math placement tests, whether their vision had been checked, whether they had moved from another school district. But I had never actually followed them down to "Miss Woolley's office" when they got in trouble until one day Mrs. Daly asked me to accompany two boys who had gotten in trouble right after recess for squirting water at each other. "I want to make sure they make it back to class quickly. Not get lost"—this with a significant look at both boys—"on the way back." So I went with them and discovered the function of one of the spaces of the school that up to that point I had only glanced at as I passed by.

After this first visit I asked permission to observe in the Punishing Room. At first the staff of the Punishing Room, all African Americans, were uneasy about my presence. But they were interested in the fact that my research was looking for answers as to why the majority of children getting into trouble and frequenting their office were African American. It turned out that this was a topic that they had theories about themselves. As a result, they not only gave me access, but urged me to look through the discipline records kept on individual children in the filing cabinets in their office.¹⁴

I spent many hours sitting in the Punishing Room, and my presence became less obtrusive as time went by. After the first few days, during which I felt that the student specialists were consciously bridling their responses to the children, being "softer" because of my presence, I became a taken-for-granted member of the setting. When this happened, verbal harangues, sympathy, even physical intimidation could

14. The student specialists also turned over to me the referral forms from 1992–93 at the end of the school year. I organized the data from the forms according to grade, race, gender, type of infraction, punishment, and noted any comments by teachers.

be expressed without the fear that I was monitoring their activities on behalf of the school district. I became even more “invisible” as I sat copying the data from the discipline files. I would sit there handwriting the contents of referral slips onto a yellow pad while a stream of children came in and out of the room with stories, explanations, complaints. Scathing adult comments and childish declarations of innocence took place as if I were not there at all. Phone calls to parents were made, and families were critically appraised by staff after these conversations. I gained a great deal of insight from these interactions. What I observed confirmed that a trip to the Punishing Room was not necessarily a shameful event but held a variety of meanings for the children. For example, one day a fifth-grade African American boy who was always in trouble saw the file folder with his name on the desk. “I got a lot in there, don’t I? Who else got one that big?” he asked. There was awe in his voice at his accomplishment. He had made an important mark on the school.

Troublemakers and Schoolboys

The heart of my research was the time I spent with twenty fifth- and sixth-grade African American boys. These boys had been selected after discussions with school personnel, review of the discipline files, and my own initial observations in and around the school. Ten of the boys, whom I have called *Schoolboys*, had been identified by the school as “doing well,” while ten boys, whom I call the *Troublemakers*, were identified as “getting into trouble.” I conducted interviews with all and spent time observing, hanging out with, and getting to know a smaller group.

The Troublemakers were no strangers to the Punishing Room. All the members of this group of boys had been suspended at home at least once over the course of the year for school infractions such as fighting, obscenity, bringing toy guns to school. None had ever been charged with illegal acts such as bringing drugs or real guns to school. None were inveterate truants; the vast majority rarely voluntarily missed a day of school and were usually on time. All had been labeled “at-risk” of failing, “unsalvageable,” or “bound for jail” by school personnel.

The Schoolboys, on the other hand, had only occasionally been handed a referral slip, and none of them had ever been suspended. At the outset of my study I saw this group as just the opposite of the

Troublemakers, as a control group; I wondered how they were different. What could we learn about the attitude, home-life, experiences of a group of boys who were clearly committed to the school's project that would help explain Troublemakers? However, I gradually realized that to see Schoolboys and Troublemakers as fundamentally different was to make a grave mistake. As African American males, Schoolboys were always on the brink of being redefined into the Troublemaker category by the school. The pressures and dilemmas this group faced around race and gender identities from adults and peers were always palpable forces working against their maintaining a commitment to the school project. That is, of course, why schools across the nation witness the continual attrition of the ranks of the "schoolboys" as they join those of the "troublemakers."

All of the boys in the study lived in the neighborhood around the school. All except two of the Schoolboys were from low-income families eligible for the school lunch program.¹⁵ The composition of these households varied greatly from family to family and affected resources available to them in significant ways. Of the Schoolboys, three came from families in which both mother and father lived in the household, four from mother-headed households, one lived with his grandmother, and one lived with both grandparents. Of the Troublemakers, two were living in families with both parents, four lived in mother-headed households, one was being raised by his father, two were in foster families, and one lived with his sister.¹⁶

I conducted a series of in-depth, unstructured interviews with the adults who had contact with the boys in the school: classroom teachers, principals, discipline staff, the district truant officer, school psychologists, social workers, school janitors. I also interviewed their parents or guardians—usually women, but in two cases fathers—as I explored the disciplinary systems outside of the school that the boys called on to make sense of interactions within the school. I came to know several of these families quite well as they drew me into their lives as a sympathetic ear, a sounding board, a person with resources and credibility in

15. About half of the kids in the school are eligible for the subsidized lunch program, while just over a third come from families that receive AFDC. Almost all of these students are from the Heartland (see note 7).

16. This pattern is replicated in the 1990 census data for the neighborhood in which a majority of the families are mother-headed households. This is in contrast to the children, mostly white, who are bused to the school from neighborhoods in which the vast majority of the families are two-parent households.

a community in which those currencies were often in short supply. In one instance, I became not just a friend or acquaintance, but was adopted as a member of the family.

Learning from Kids

Though I paid attention to the accounts of a variety of individuals and heard explanations and theories from numerous viewpoints, it is the perspective and the voices of the kids, mostly boys, whom I talked to that animate and bind this text together. I have spotlighted their voices not only because they are the most silenced and the most invalidated in discussions of school trouble and punishment, but also because they provide a critical view that augments significantly our knowledge about the contemporary crisis in education.

How I heard the voices of the boys whom I interviewed and how I listened to what they were saying changed qualitatively over the course of my research. I assumed at the start that I would learn *about* kids; but it was not long before I was obliged to question this premise and begin to learn *from* children. This enabled me to tell their story from a fresh viewpoint.

In my initial research design I had planned to learn about kids through “formal” interviews as well as through observation. My goal was to tape-record in my office at the university conversations about several topics including school, trouble and punishment, friends, heroes, adult careers. The venue of the interview was to set a tone of adult importance and serious business to the engagement that I hoped would have an effect on the quality of the responses that I got from the children.

I explained to the boys that I was writing a book about kids and school and that I wanted to tell the story from their perspective; that I needed their help, what they knew, in order to write something good. Word got around to their friends that I was writing a book, and a few approached me and asked if they could be in it. I was surprised at how savvy they were about the telling of life stories. For one thing, the favorite television program of almost all the kids was the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, which featured the telling of personal stories. One boy asked me what kind of cover the book would have; another seemed disappointed that I would not be using his real name. Most of the boys seemed genuinely pleased to discover that I wanted to talk about things that inter-

ested them. Two of them, however, were especially noncommittal during the interview. These two already had to deal with the criminal justice system. One boy had, in fact, been placed in a foster home for several days when his mother was arrested. Their demeanor was by no means hostile but extremely cautious, monosyllabic, noncommittal. After I interviewed each kid, he had a turn to be the interviewer and ask me whatever questions he wanted. Several took me up on the offer. I was asked about my work, my family, and what I spent my money on. Just the kind of questions I might get from social science researchers.

When the formal interviews were over, the reward for the boys was pizza and a visit to nearby video arcades, or a trip up to the lookout deck of the highest building at the university. I found that the spontaneous conversations that I had with them during these outings were often more informative about the topics that I was interested in than the actual interviews. The question-and-answer format, with me in control of the topic and them responding, was not the best one; in this form of dialogue, the kids responded to my questions, but carefully. Too carefully. On the other hand, rich stories of experience in and out of school, observations and theories, bits of advice, flowed out of the ad-lib, spontaneous conversations during the course of our “free” time together. I began to realize how imperative it was to rethink my interviewing strategies. “Free time” was the space in which the kids felt free to talk about what interested and impressed them. So, while I continued with the formal interviews, I began to understand that the time before and after the interviews was even more important.

When I decided to study a group of young people I did not think about how I would gain access to their meaning systems. I admit now with embarrassment that when I began the research my assumption was that my own knowledge and experience would give me the tools necessary to figure out what was going on in the lives of the boys I would interview and observe. I was required to provide a lengthy protocol for the Human Subjects Committee at the university. This procedure was couched in terms of “protecting children,” so my efforts in composing the protocol were to assure the committee that my interview questions would not traumatize the “interviewees” in any way. At that point, my unexamined research common sense was that children were substantively different than adults; they were more transparent. They were “natural” subjects whose behavior I would interpret, rather than having to elicit interpretations from the kids themselves. I could

observe them in depth—almost as if they were animals in the laboratory—to make sense of what I perceived. They were somehow more accessible because they were less social, more biologically determined. They were not yet totally “human,” but were humans-in-the-making. It was me, not them, who was wise.

I was an “adult,” beyond biology and development because fully social, and would use my knowledge of the world to interpret what I saw them do and what they told me of their lives. I did not even think about whether the kids would choose to let me into their lives, tell me their stories. They were on the surface: I would not have to plunge deep into another world of experience, meaning, interpretation, learn another language, unscramble new codes and symbols.

For one, I believed that I already knew a great deal about childhood. I am the mother of two sons; I have been a schoolteacher. From these experiences, I assumed that children could be extremely good at keeping, and highly motivated to keep, secrets, so that I would have to work to put them at their ease with me. I planned to draw on the legendary uncanny ability of mothers to ferret out information. But the “omniscient mother” as interviewer kept me locked into a perspective, into strategies of power from which I had to move away. This “extorting information model” offered few surprises.

I had underestimated the enormous chasm of power that separated grown-ups and young people. For one thing, question and answer is the customary form of communicative exchange between powerful and powerless, between adult and child. The young, especially, under the circumstances of being interviewed by an outsider are guarded, cautious. They have been taught to be suspicious of strangers. They have usually learned that almost anything they say can be the “wrong” answer, can get them into trouble. Boys who were already marked as troublesome were often anxious to present themselves in as positive a light as possible. They wanted me to be aware that they knew what was “right” and “wrong” in the context of school. In spite of my pledge prior to the taped interview that what they said would be confidential, they could not be absolutely sure that they could trust me. Why should they? They were in the position of guarding not only themselves but also families and friends from my scrutiny. The interview format also contravened the code against “telling” that adults seek to undermine in the name of “truth.” As an interviewer, I too, was asking them to “tell.”

Who and where I was in my own life acted both as a barrier and a

facilitator to making meaning of their lives. I was an older black woman, not a youth, not male; yet, my life as a graduate student helped to freshen my memory of what it meant to be a “child” in a world of total and arbitrary “adult” power. To be a graduate student was to be “infantilized.” I had returned to graduate school after years of working as a teacher, as a social worker, as a university administrator. I had mothered. But the hierarchy of knowledge in the university was one in which my accumulated knowledge counted for nothing; I was expected to start as if I were a blank slate on which would be written the theories, ways of understanding the world that were gleaned from “approved” texts. In seminars, I found that discussions of work, mothering, bureaucracy, and organizations deliberately excluded the personal experience of those around the table from what was considered appropriate, admissible data. Those students who drew on life experience in seminars quickly learned that scholarly discussion moved on over this offering as if it never occurred. I learned that experience was a shameful burden of knowledge acquired “practically,” every day, rather than “theoretically” from a distance. This erasure of a particular form of knowing the world by the academy was one aspect of my present life that helped me to listen more respectfully to the children’s talk than I might have otherwise. Moreover, it opened me up to consider how the knowledge, experience, and forms of expression that were brought into school by the group of kids that I was studying were excluded.

Research Assistance: Introducing Horace

But it was fundamentally through my relationship with twelve-year-old Horace that I began to be conscious that my research agenda was focused on learning about boys rather than from them. I was assigned to be Horace’s tutor in the after-school program the first semester of my fieldwork. Though I wanted to get to know one of the boys “getting in trouble,” I worried about whether I would be able to “handle” him. My anxiety had been raised by the reputation he had among school adults as a boy who was difficult and out of control. Horace’s name had become the standard against which other children would be judged. For example, in a faculty meeting discussion of another African American boy at the school, Horace’s name was invoked as the norm. The adult said, “That child’s a problem, but he’s not a Horace.”

In spite of the bad press that he had gotten from the school adults

and my anxiety about working with him, we got along well. I often found him exasperatingly determined to control the conditions of his after-school tutoring sessions. But I recognized that he was leaning on the side of “humanizing” our relationship, while I was bent on making our time together as “productive” as possible. I was out to “teach” him something. He was carefully laying out, testing, and undermining the original terms of our relationship, in which I had all the power and respect and he had none. With his help, I came to see kids not as humans-in-the-making but as resourceful social actors who took an active role in shaping their daily experiences. I began to recognize and appreciate the stresses and strains they faced and the strategies they devised for negotiating and maneuvering within structures of power.

Over the weeks and months that I got to know Horace, I pieced together a shifting portrait of how he was seen by others: his teachers, the student specialists, the principals, his mother and siblings; and how he saw himself. I also listened carefully to the stories Horace told me about what was going on in his life as well as his analysis of relationships in and out of school.

These stories and the time Horace and I spent together confirmed what I had suspected, had gotten glimpses of through observation in the school, through interviews with some of the boys’ families. Those who were classified as lazy, belligerent, incorrigible at school could be respectful, diligent, and responsible in other contexts. Horace, who was characterized by school as “volatile,” “insubordinate,” was also described by others who knew him in different contexts as “a team player,” “affectionate,” “great with kids.” From my observation of Horace, I could see that he tested, resisted, and defied the authority of certain adults. But it became clear that he was also conforming, obedient, and deeply focused in other contexts in school and out.

At the end of my first year of fieldwork at Rosa Parks, I asked Horace to be my research assistant during the summer vacation to help me put together the topics for my interviews with the other boys. He turned out to be an excellent guide to issues on young boys’ minds with a remarkable “sociological eye.” He saw patterns, relationships, contradictions, and disjunctures. Horace helped me decide—I might say he insisted—on the themes for the interviews I later conducted with the other boys. He was quick to let me know when he thought I was beating a topic to death or asking a question to which the answer seemed obvious. He interviewed *me* on issues such as mothering, school, and money.

Most important of all, he pointed out that I would learn nothing about his peers and himself if I didn't listen to their music. So I tuned in to their favorite radio station listening to the rap music, the DJ talk, the phone-in calls that weaved them together. I listened to the commercials, the advice, the attitudes that were being dished out. I began watching music videos. I became familiar with the names and works of contemporary popular rap artists such as Ice Cube, Ice T, Paris, Naughty by Nature, Pooh Man, Snoop Doggy Dog, Dr. Dre, Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Salt 'n' Pepa. I found that rap lyrics and the accompanying visual images, though sometimes offensive and shocking, and almost ritualistically misogynist, were also witty, ribald, catchy, and often sharpened by a measure of social criticism and political commentary. I was delighted to find that the lyrics articulated some of the very ironies and contradictions that I myself observed as a researcher. I have selected some examples of these as epigraphs to introduce and set the tone for several chapters of this book.

My introduction to this music opened up a cultural space to me that was far more rich and critically innovative than I had expected; it was more than the background noise and mindless escape of the music of my own youth that reproduced simple hegemonic notions of romance and power. Instead, I discovered a potent alternative site of knowledge for youth about bodies and beauty, sexuality, gender relationships, racial identification, authority, justice and injustice, loyalty and friendship, style and address, transmitted through a vehicle that simultaneously engaged pleasure and fantasy.

My brief and intense exposure to and growing familiarity with this cultural production was an indispensable element in alerting me to some key sources that the boys drew on for self-fashioning. Two of these are especially significant for this work. First, as I listened to the music, heard the lyrics, watched the images, I became conscious of the highly controversial, embattled figure of the "gangsta" in gangster rap. Rather than the stigmatized figure of the criminal feared by members of society, the gangster in rap music and videos was a heroic medium for articulating the tragic realities of urban poverty as well as the dangers, pleasures, and privileges of being male. This image led me to consider the multiple ways of incorporating authority figures, rules and laws, transgressive acts and consequences into a worldview. Second, I became aware that the alternative, critical discourse and heightened conscious-

ness about race and racism that some kids brought to school was reflected in the lyrics and images of rap music.

Race Signifies

A structuring element of this text is an examination and analysis of the continuing significance of “race” as a system for organizing social difference and as a device for reproducing inequality in contemporary United States.¹⁷ Race continues to be a ready-made filter for interpreting events, informing social interactions, and grounding identities and identification in school. One racial interpretation infusing several boys’ accounts of the school day was that African American boys were singled out for punishment because of their race.

This claim was especially provocative because school adults were visibly uneasy about, and committed to, avoiding public discussions of race that went beyond a recitation of desegregation demographics. While several kids raised the issue of how race made a difference in their experience of school, the adults typically limited their talk about race to matters of numbers and distributions. Officially, race existed in school as the baseline category for classifying and distributing kids throughout the system and into classrooms, but beyond that the public consensus among adults was that distinctions of race were of no further significance. The working assumption was that racial discrimination had come to an end with school desegregation; that in its everyday operations school was race-blind to the differences that had led to the need for busing in the first place. In relation to this study, the position was that children were sent to the Punishing Room not because of who they were, but because of what they did. The institutional discourse was that getting in trouble was not about race but a matter of individual choice and personal responsibility: each child made a choice to be “good” or “bad.” The homily “The Choice is Yours” was printed at the top of the list of school rules to emphasize this connection.

However, this discourse of “individual choice” was undercut by a more covert, secretive conversation about race that circulated primarily

17. I use the concept of race not to mark off essential, fixed differences between groups of humans but to refer to a socially constructed category of human difference and division whose boundaries and meanings have changed over time, but which always is a mechanism for the unequal distribution and allocation of social goods and status. This category, though a social fiction, because it is politically motivated has serious, real consequences for individuals and for social life.

among African American adults in the school that presumed race to be a continuing force in determining the outcome for children. In public, school people seemed to subscribe to explanations that the “at-riskness” of children was a consequence of apathetic or dysfunctional families; but in private conversations and interviews, black teachers and staff hinted that race, gender, and class made a significant difference in a child’s experience of school. They suggested that certain boys got picked on because they were black and came from the neighborhood; that white teachers didn’t know how to discipline black kids; that white teachers were “intimidated” by black boys; that some African American teachers had problems working with the neighborhood children, almost all of whom were black and poor. In several of these conversations, individuals seemed to be egging me on to pursue the saliency of race to the phenomena over which I was puzzling.

To jump to the conclusion that racism is a significant component of the problem is, in fact, not all that far-fetched. Up to 1968, when Arcadia schools were desegregated, the observation that black children were being treated differently from white children would have been a mere statement of fact. Racial discrimination sanctioned by law and by custom was the norm across the United States in every sphere. The Arcadia School District had, as did the vast majority of school districts across the United States, an official policy of racial segregation that applied not only to children, but to teachers as well.¹⁸ Race made a vast difference in the treatment that was afforded to black and white students. Segregated schools were organized on the assumption that white students were entitled to a better education than black students. Black children were not being educated to compete with whites for jobs in the adult world of work. Memories of this injustice is still very much alive at Rosa Parks School among faculty and staff. Cyril Wilkins, the African American custodian at Rosa Parks, and a product of Arcadia schools, reminded me of this when he recalled applying for a job as a bus driver in Arcadia in the 1960s and having his application form crumpled up and tossed into a wastebasket right before his eyes by the white man in charge of hiring because those jobs were not open to black people.

Cyril Wilkins’s personal experience is a vivid reminder of how the ways for maintaining racial hierarchies in the United States have

18. No black teacher taught in an Arcadia district white school until the late 1960s.

changed over the past generation as a result of political struggle. The marking of the boundaries of racial difference and the form that racism takes has varied according to the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded. Legal and open institutional endorsement of racial discrimination was dismantled as a consequence of the Civil Rights Movement that culminated in the 1960s. Disqualification on the basis of race in the blatant manner that Wilkins describes is now illegal. Yet, in spite of this profound legislative change, “race” continues to be a significant mode for the distribution of power in the society.¹⁹

For purposes of this study, we need to be aware of two ways that racial inequalities are reproduced today. One is through institutional practices, and the other is through cultural representations of racial difference. Both operate in a covert and informal manner. *Bad Boys* is a study of these two modes: how institutional norms and procedures in the field of education are used to maintain a racial order, and how images and racial myths frame how we see ourselves and others in a racial hierarchy.

Institutional practices continue to marginalize or exclude African Americans in the economy and society through the exercise of rules and purportedly objective standards by individuals who may consider themselves racially unbiased.²⁰ Punishment is a fruitful site for a close-up look at routine institutional practices, individual acts, and cultural

19. For examples of this in the realm of housing see Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); in schooling see Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*; for an overview of some recent studies in business, see chapter 5 of Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes, *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

20. The concept of institutional racism as distinct from individual prejudice and bigotry was elaborated on by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Press, 1967). On page 5 they argued that “institutional racism relies on the active and pervasive operation of anti-black attitudes and practices. A sense of superior group position prevails: whites are ‘better’ than blacks; therefore blacks should be subordinated to whites. . . . ‘Respectable’ individuals can absolve themselves from individual blame: *they* would never plant a bomb in the church; *they* would never stone a black family. But they continue to support political officials and institutions that would and do perpetuate institutionally racist policies. Thus *acts* of overt, individual racism may not typify the society, but institutional racism does—with the support of covert, individual *attitudes* of racism.” See also Thomas Pettigrew, ed., *Racial Discrimination in the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), x, for the following description: “racial discrimination is basically an institutional process of exclusion against an outgroup on largely ascribed and particularistic grounds of group membership rather than on achieved and universalistic grounds of merit.”

sanctions that give life and power to racism in a school setting that not only produces massive despair and failure among black students, but that increasingly demonizes them.

In this contemporary racial formation the category of race has increasingly been defined through cultural rather than biological difference.²¹ Relations of power and inequality are explained as the demonstrated consequence of superior or pathological cultural characteristics. Attitudes, values, behaviors, familial and community practices become the field from which social distinctions derive. Black people, in this form of racism, can only redress their condition by rejecting the cultural modes that make them “different.” So, in the school setting, it is assumed that it is the cultural difference kids bring to school that produces the existing pattern of punishment rather than institutional operations themselves.²² Since a good part of the ideological work of race is to fix meanings and relationships as natural and durable, the racialization of cultural forms and practices not only extracts behaviors and attitudes from the social matrix in which they are embedded but transforms them into immutable racially linked characteristics that produce poverty and bad citizens.

Two cultural images stigmatize black males in the United States today: one represents him as a criminal, and the other depicts him as an endangered species. I found that both of these images were commonly invoked at Rosa Parks School for identifying, classifying, and making punishment decisions by the adults responsible for disciplining the kids.

It is important that we understand human culture differently—not as a set of immutable characteristics that seem to be transmitted through the genes but as a practical, active, creative response to specific social and historical conditions. As such, culture can be a significant mode of defense, of succor, of resistance and recuperation for those

21. For discussion of historical changes in the racial formation in the United States see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986). Paul Gilroy’s work provides important parallels with racial formation in Britain. See, for example, Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Culture* (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1993).

22. An example of this connection between race and culture and how it is used in understanding school trouble is found in the article about the Cincinnati schools by Hull, “Do Teachers Punish?” Teachers and administrators explained the disproportionate number of African Americans who were suspended by stating that “blacks tend to be more boisterous,” “black students are much more trouble prone,” and “some black males are more physical.”

with few sources of power in society. A good illustration of this, which I elaborate on in the text, is the way that African American boys use language brought from home and community as a form of self-protection and asserting a group identification in opposition to school.

An example of the multiple meanings and contradictory uses of culture and of cultural representation developed in this study is the way in which a national event acts as a catalyst to both mark "otherness" and heighten racial self-definition. The videotaped beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police, the trial and acquittal of the men charged with the attack, and the subsequent riots in Los Angeles occurred during my research. Students reacted visibly and vocally to the racism and public discourse emanating from the events. In this way race came into the school to create cultural and racial awareness. School adults, at the same time, drew on the spectacular events as a framework for evaluating the behavior of black kids. This national outpouring also made visible to me the way that traumatic and emotionally disturbing events outside of school directly contributed to children's anger and troubling behavior in school and how unwilling our society is to deal with issues of race as a real, divisive, social problem.

I have organized the text to reflect certain theoretical and methodological considerations of my research. One aim is to join the debate about the relative significance of social structure and personal agency in explaining human behavior.²³ As I was engaged in this project, I found stimulating and compelling arguments on both sides of this discussion.²⁴ I have found it rewarding to utilize both approaches to demonstrate the interplay between the determining effects of social structure

23. For an excellent summary of these positions see chapter 2 of Jay MacLeod, *Ain't No Making It: Leveled Aspirations in a Low-Income Neighborhood* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1987); Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, *Education under Siege: The Conservative, Liberal, and Radical Debate over Schooling* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergen and Garvey, 1985).

24. On the structural determinist side I found the following works most persuasive and insightful: Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). Some of the work that stressed personal agency and the creative insights and oppositional responses of subjects that I found important included that of Patricia Hill Collins and of John Ogbu. See for example, Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990); and John U. Ogbu, "Class Stratification, Racial Stratification, and Schooling," in *Class, Race, and Gender in American Educational Research: Toward a Nonsynchronous Parallel Position*, ed. Lois Weis (Albany: State University of

and the creative response of individuals in everyday life that usually reproduces a status quo, but that sometimes produces change. Punishment is an especially fruitful site for this demonstration, as it is a space where educational structures clash with the resistance strategies of individual students. My conviction is, however, that the balance tilts heavily in favor of structural determinants.

The text is, therefore, designed to reveal this interaction between institutional and individual forces. There are two parts. The first part emphasizes structure. In this part I describe and analyze the disciplinary system of the school and the practices of labeling and categorization that construct the boys as individuals with behavioral problems. The second part foregrounds the meaningful actions of individuals as I present the school day from the youths' perspective. Here, I explore how kids recoup a sense of self as competent and worthy under extremely discouraging work conditions. Sadly, they do this by getting in trouble.

Another goal is to elaborate through practical application the theoretical work that challenges the use of the categories of race, class, and gender, as if they are isolated and independent social locations.²⁵ My analysis foregrounds the technologies of representation of subjects and the experience of subjectivity as a complex, dynamic interaction of race and gender. Sex is a powerful marker of difference as well as race. While the concept of intersecting social categories is a useful analytical device for formulating this convergence, in reality we presume to know each other instantly in a coherent, apparently seamless way. We do not experience individuals as bearers of separate identities, as gendered and then as raced or vice versa, but as both at once. The two are inextricably intertwined and circulate together in the representations of subjects

New York Press, 1988). The work that most inspired my own thinking in the early phases of my research was that which stressed the active cultural production of resistance and opposition: Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); and Paul Willis, "Cultural Production Is Different from Cultural Reproduction Is Different from Social Reproduction Is Different from Reproduction," *Interchange* 12, nos. 2–3 (1981).

25. For example, see Rose M. Brewer, "Theorizing Race, Class, and Gender: The New Scholarship of Black Feminist Intellectuals and Black Women's Labor," in *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, ed. Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia (New York: Routledge, 1993). For a discussion and application of the concept of "intersectionality," see Kimberle Crenshaw, "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew," in *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*, ed. Mari J. Matsuda et al. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993).

and the experience of subjectivity. Though the racial etiquette of today's form of racism has sent a discourse of racial difference underground, it piggybacks on our beliefs about sex difference in the construction of images. I explore the specific way that black boys are constituted as different from boys-in-general by virtue of the sexing of racial meaning.

I have also structured the text along methodological lines to suggest the interplay between the "raw" form of the data that I collected and my own interpretive and analytical authorial work in framing the documentary evidence as one thing rather than another. Interspersed between the chapters is an example of the types of data that I drew on as I pulled together the strands that became this story: self-reflexive musings, transcriptions of interviews, primary source materials, field notes. These documents are, of course, not mere "examples," but are intentionally chosen to illustrate or to strengthen points that I make in the chapters themselves. Several of these seem to speak for themselves with the richly detailed, complex, often contradictory subjective voices that are the fabric out of which the ethnographer as storyteller tailors a coherent account. I have tried as much as possible to leave these complexities and contradictions in so that you, the reader, can more consciously participate in the critical work of interpretation.