

chapter five

the real world

*It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under
It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under*

*Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs
You know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away but I couldn't get far
'Cause the man with the tow truck repossessed my car.*

*Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head.
Ah huh huh huh huh
It's like a jungle sometimes, it make me wonder
How I keep from going under.*

—GRANDMASTER FLASH AND THE FURIOUS FIVE, “THE MESSAGE”

It was candy, sweet, chewy, a pink and white swirl on a stick, glossy and fragrant from a big jar and offered to me for sale by a fourth-grade girl that got me thinking seriously about the meaning of rules for different groups of children in the school. Until that moment, school rules were really only words written on a piece of paper. Myelisha, a pupil in the after-school tutoring program, had pulled the jar of candy out of her backpack and asked me to buy one.

“Do you have a quarter?” she asked. “They’re cheap.” I looked over

my shoulder furtively. Candy in school was against the rules, and as tempted as I was by the lollipop I realized that it might be trouble for me if I was seen giving money to a fourth-grader in exchange for candy. My own approach to rule breaking, I discovered, was fearful, shifty behavior.

"Here. If you don't have the money today, I'll give you one," Myelisha was saying, pulling out something wrapped in red and yellow paper. "Pay me later," she said grandly.

"Careful, Myelisha, having candy is against the school rules. You should put that away until later." I could see teachers moving around at other tables. I was afraid that one of them might dart over at any moment and seize the contraband.

"Hush, Ann," Myelisha was teasing me now in a singsong voice a smile on her face. "The teachers was the one started selling candy first. So there!"

We were both right. I in the legalistic sense, paying attention to the authority of the written, the codified. One of the most concrete, straightforward of the rules listed on the poster that hung on the wall of every classroom was that no candy was allowed in school. At the same time candy was everywhere. Kids had candy in their desks, in their school packs, in their pockets. I had observed several of them ordered to spit out "whatever that is you're eating," followed by a ball of sugar, well-sculpted by a tongue, plummeting into the nearest wastebasket. One day, one of the boys in Mrs. Deane's class was sent to the office because he took up too much class time as he moved from his desk to the wastebasket. Candy, having it, sharing it, eating it, and selling it, was prohibited in school.

Yet for the past week, as both Myelisha and I had observed, children in various classrooms had been toting boxes of candy around and selling openly. This sales drive had been initiated by the teachers to raise money for class activities. While children were supposed to take the candy home and sell it to relatives, friends, and neighbors, teachers were ignoring efforts to make sales at school. Our tutoring sessions had been disrupted by kids pressing adults to buy, to make change, and by the banking of substantial amounts of money. The rule about candy in school had not been overturned but was being overlooked for the time being. The sale of authorized candy was now permitted, which allowed individual entrepreneurs to display their wares.

Myelisha's profits were also for a worthy cause. She informed me

that *she* was selling candy in order to put on a birthday party for her mother. She wanted to buy a present and get a nice cake. Other children were coming over to our table and after handing over pennies, nickels, and dimes were being allowed to put their hand in the jar and make a selection. Myelisha was letting no one but me have candy on credit. Even a girl I had come to know as one of her good friends was turned down decisively. "Try and get it from Somika," she suggests as she refuses to let her friend take a handful of Tootsie Rolls now and bring the money tomorrow.

Nor is this the end of Myelisha's entrepreneurial career. Several weeks later, during the school day, I find her wandering around in the hallway. I have noticed that she is often in the hallway when classes are in session. No one ever seems to notice her there—judging from the absence of her name on referrals for being tardy or cutting. "Hey Ann!" she hails me. "I'm selling Santa cups, wanta buy one?"

I try to put her off. "Aren't you in class now? Maybe later."

"No, wait." She ducks in and out of her classroom in no time, and comes back bearing a brightly painted mug molded with a Santa Claus face and filled with candy. "It's three dollars. I'm going to buy my mom a Christmas present. Take it now and you can give me the money later." My credit is always good with her.

Later, when I am paying off my debt, I discover that the candy in the mug has been culled from the Halloween candy that Myelisha and her older sister collected several weeks before when they were out trick or treating.

There is a thriving informal economy in the school. The adult focus on contraband has been on the possibility of kids bringing drugs to school. While no child was ever caught with possession or sale of drugs during the period that I was a participant observer, a number of children were caught selling things to eat.

Jamar, one of the Troublemakers, brought his lunch in a plastic shopping bag. He often had several apples, oranges, bananas, as well as a sandwich. After recess, I would notice him tossing an orange to one of his classmates, an apple to another. I was puzzled by his "sharing," since often the kids who were receiving the fruit were not members of the group he spent time with at recess. I discovered that he was selling the fruit one day when, as he tossed an orange to one of the boys, his teacher warned him that she knew what was going on and he had better stop bringing food to school to sell or she would send him to the principal.

Myelisha and Jamar live in the neighborhood around Rosa Parks School. They are both African American children and their families are poor. They are among the 50 percent of the children in the school eligible for the free lunch program. When Myelisha and Jamar sell food or candy in school, they are working to earn money. They are also breaking the rules.

The purpose of these anecdotes is to point to two features of what kids know and believe about school rules and getting in trouble: first, children are highly aware that rules are arbitrarily applied, often flagrantly ignored, by the adults; second, the rules and relative cost of getting into trouble for breaking them have different meanings for different groups of children in the school. The candy example is an obvious one: for some children the small amount of money that is earned through food sales makes a difference in the cash available to a family living on the economic edge. From this perspective, choosing to break the rule makes sense. A simple rule like the ban on candy means something different to children from low-income families than it does to the children of the affluent. This mix of marginal poverty and relative affluence is exactly the combination of pupils at Rosa Parks School. At the same time, race differences mirror class divisions in the school. The vast majority of the children from low-income families are African American, while the middle-class children are predominately white. Childhood is constituted within a social order divided sharply along class and race lines.

This condition of racialized poverty is the matrix for the reverse discourse and the use of local “popular” knowledge that Myelisha, the Troublemakers, and the Schoolboys bring to school to make sense of the rules, of relationships with peers and adults, and of work and play. The choice to abide by the rules is not an individual matter at all but influenced and constrained by one’s social class location and the access to the material and cultural capital that this position provides.

What I am referring to here as popular knowledge is what is described by Foucault as “local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges” that serve as a source for a critical stance toward institutional knowledge and power.¹ This form of knowledge confronts

1. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 82.

institutional practices with a distinct, competing set of theories and methods of knowing the world. It relies heavily but not solely on observation and experience; the data gathered by the senses and the emotions is taken seriously and valued over book learning. Folk and popular culture are important vehicles for this knowledge. It is the form of knowledge that the individualizing, dispersing, hierarchizing strategies of school seeks to eradicate.

Popular knowledge is rooted in a particular social and geographic space, the neighborhood. Embedded in the local, it draws on lore that is orally transmitted through family histories, forms of music and song, cautionary tales as story and rumor.

Now let us follow Troublemakers and Schoolboys out of school to the neighborhoods in which they live to examine the familial and public space where their identification is rooted and to pinpoint the elements of popular knowledge generated in family and neighborhood. This excursion reveals how class location and mobility strategies as well as race and gender identities shape what African American boys learn about dealing with power and authority. It uncovers several interrelated aspects of popular knowledge that directly affect how the boys deal with school: observation and experience as a method of knowing; a critical and oppositional stance to authority; and a collective rather than individualized explanatory frame that constitutes black masculinity in a context of social terror.

Neighborhood

The notion of neighborhood came up in conversation as several of the boys asked me whether I lived in or had grown up in “a good neighborhood” or “bad neighborhood.” They were trying to figure me out. They wanted to know if I had the experiential knowledge to appreciate what they were telling me. They assumed that where you lived shaped the knowledge base that generated different modes of being in the world. For example, Eddie asked me, “Were you raised up in a bad neighborhood? If you were raised up in a bad area then you have to know how to defend yourself.”

The assessment of their neighborhood as “bad” by the boys is neither a figment of their imagination nor an exaggeration. The components of a “bad” neighborhood include both objective indicators as well

as the subjective feelings of the people who live there. At a first glance, the neighborhood around the school where most of the boys live appears deceptively quiet and stable. When I first drove around the area surrounding the school I was pleasantly surprised to see streets lined with small houses and apartment buildings that seemed peaceful and quiet, yards that were neat. The area did not fit the image I had of a low-income urban environment as physically unkempt and rundown. A closer look, however, revealed the evidence of problems. The most visible of these were street signs warning drug dealers and their customers that they were being watched. Drug dealing is symptomatic of an ensemble of other social ills: unemployment, theft, guns, homicide, police brutality and harassment. Since the highest percentage of murders in Arcadia occur in this precinct, the neighborhood is, indeed, one of the most dangerous in the city.

What is the likely life-world for children living in this neighborhood? They are likely to come from female-headed households that must worry about money for basic necessities.² Whether a child grows up in a household that is headed by a single female or a married couple or is multigenerational has profound effects on the family environment and budget. The more adults that families can muster to help with child minding, laundry, cooking, cleaning, and shopping, the better. In the past, low-income African American families typically lived in multigenerational households, and family networks provided the physical and material backup support for single mothers.³ The fairly recent breakup of this kind of household means the physical and emotional work of child rearing and housework has to be shouldered by single women, many of whom often already work for a wage outside the home.⁴ Funding for public social services has also been disappearing, so organized recreation and after-school programs for children that might have offset some of this burden have not been extended to fill the gap.

There is now an all-pervasive fear that families will lose their children to the "bad" elements of the neighborhood. This influences the child-rearing practices of adults and colors the experience and meaning of childhood in and out of school for families in the neighborhood.

2. U.S. Census, 1990.

3. Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

4. Niara Sudarkasa, "African-American Families and Family Values," in *Black Families*, ed. Harriette Pipes McAdoo (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997).

Family Lessons

Families talked to me about what they believe is vital knowledge for the boys to have when they go, as they put it, out into “the real world.” This means life outside the relative security of home. While these family precepts included the general messages that parents pass on to kids, they also emphasized the special instructions that were a matter of life and death for young black males. The adults are filled with dread about what might happen when their sons leave their house every day. They especially worry that the boys will do something that will entangle them in “the system,” the shorthand reference to the criminal justice system.

At this stage, kids are still young enough that parents feel they have some control over their social development as well as their physical comings and goings, their social relationships. They feel an urgency to inculcate strategies in the boys for dealing with the humiliating and often dangerous situations in which they are likely to find themselves. These guidelines are conveyed through exhortation and modeling, cautionary tales of personal experience, and through object lessons drawn from witnessing public racial spectacles. Embedded in these life-lessons is wisdom about the meaning of Blackness and its special dangers for males in contemporary America.

Many of these precepts and the underlying assumptions of family life-lessons came to light in interviews that are worth recounting. I have made selections from the family interviews that typify the two prevailing survival strategies in the neighborhood. The first anticipates upward mobility for their sons through school achievement. These prescribe strategies of “racelessness” in the presentation of self and avoidance to deal with racism. The second strategy is found in poor families who feel unable to protect their kids from the exigencies of the real world. Their kids must learn how to stand up for themselves and play more adult roles. It is not feasible for these parents to advocate avoidance, nor do they have the cultural capital to promote racelessness.

The Norton family pursues a strategy of racelessness and avoidance. The family includes Terrence, one of the Schoolboys, and his mother and father, Arlene and Desmond. Both adults have relatively well paid jobs. Terrence’s father is a mechanic at a local car dealership; his mother is a nurse. With their two incomes they can afford to live a middle-class lifestyle. They have bought an older home and remodeled

it, doing most of the work themselves. Terrence is their only child and they want to make sure that he has the best education, so they sent him to a private school for his first four years of education. Their growing concern that he was learning little about the real world in that setting made them decide to enroll him in public school. He is now in his second year at Rosa Parks.

Terrence's parents believe there are some essential things that every African American boy must learn about the real world. These range from what to wear and how to conduct oneself in public, to relationships with other human beings, and the proper performance of masculinity. It seems like fairly typical elements of parental advice. However, their instructions about styles of self-presentation are specifically designed to prepare him for a life in which he will be a target for verbal and physical assaults from strangers as well as acquaintances because of his race. As a way of warding off these types of encounters, they give him tools to downplay his Blackness, to camouflage himself through a careful selection of clothing, mode of self-deportment and style. The most important aspect of these is how to derace himself, make himself visibly different from the prevailing image of black males as poor, lawless, and dangerous. Terrence must learn how to demonstrate through a variety of symbolic gestures that he is harmless.

His father, Desmond, describes how significant the choice of clothing is in this presentation of self:

It doesn't make any difference where you are or how much money you have because you don't want to dress like you a Fortune 500 company everyday. . . . You might just want to go to the store in your torn pants looking all raggedy and everything and walk around and not buy nothing. Which is supposed to be okay. But for some people it's not okay. You just can't go to the department store and just hang out.

Terrence's father knows that if you are black and male you do not have the freedom to wear whatever you like, whatever you are comfortable in, when you go into public. He teaches his son that he must select clothing carefully; not based on individual preference, but as a protective layer for psychic even physical survival. Terrence cannot take for granted the permission to linger and loiter in the public space, especially if he is not dressed to look like a person of means and status.

Black males who want to avoid humiliating encounters must dress so they can be seen as purposeful, conservative, not threatening.

Demeanor is important, so is the ability to produce money as physical evidence of one's value. Desmond assumes that this surface presentation of self will help to stave off harassment:

Even at his age, he knows prejudice exists. He knows people sometime aren't informed as he is. That he's polite—for whatever reason people might look at him and he might go to a store y'know. He told me last week he went to a store with his cousins, and that is something I really don't allow him to do go around a store and browse around because people will follow him around just because he's a little black kid. Figure that they come in and steal something. I as a parent, anytime that Terrence is gone I tell him that he make sure that he has at least a couple of dollars in his pocket just so people can realize he's not going around stealing anything. He has a little money in his pocket. He can buy little knickknacks if he goes to the store or anywhere.

Desmond presents racism as stemming from individual prejudice and ignorance rather than institutional practice and power. Arlene, Terrence's mother, speaks about racism as a more generalized phenomenon. Both ground their cautionary tales about presentation of self in the world in experience. Desmond has been stopped and interrogated by the police when he was on his way home one night for no apparent reason. He was questioned at length about where he was going and where he was coming from. Arlene described how the incident was used to teach Terrence about the real world:

My husband has had experiences since we've lived in this house where he has had interaction with the police that hasn't been favorable or that have been precipitated largely because he's black. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Those experiences he's shared with Terrence. I think that they are very important for our son to learn about the real world. No matter how we like to think the world is today.

Arlene believes that it is crucial to teach her son that dominant representations of Blackness will determine how people see him. The only

way to mitigate this stereotyping is through proving your difference from the racial image. She sees education and putting forward a 100 percent effort as the only way to do this:

It is important that black male children or even black children period are taught to be prepared. Prepare yourself the best way you possibly can. That means doing well in school academically. Doing your best at everything you attempt to do. To be your best—'cause there's one thing that's never going to change about you—and that's your skin color and you can't change people's perceptions based on that. Even as a black professional, my colleagues, their perception of me doesn't change just because I'm educated. Constantly you have to prove who you are or that you're worthy, if you choose to do so. It's a constant thing. Racial attitudes are embedded in the person and there's really not a heck of a lot that the individual who's subjected to the negative racial attitudes can do about it other than to be the very best that you can be at anything you desire to be. . . . And I think that kids need to learn that.

She draws on her own experience as a professional who still has to prove her "worth" because she is always and already seen through a racial lens as "inferior." She feels pressure to demonstrate that she is different from her colleagues' preconception of her. Her own move for inclusion is to work at being "worthy."

Terrence had his own direct experience with racism when one of the white kids in the neighborhood called him "nigger." Desmond described their reaction to the incident:

She [points to Arlene] blew up and wanted to do something about it. But I didn't. I told him it's not the first time that someone's going to call you a nigger and it won't be the last time, and I asked him, I said, "How many times have you called your friends at school a nigger?" And he said [laughing], "A lot of times." So I said, "Well, see, its okay for a black person to call a black person a nigger." I guess its like a Mexican calling a Mexican a "chollo" as long as it's in your family. But when it comes outside of your family it'll pinch you.

Arlene's response is to act; Desmond's is to use this event as a way of inuring the boy to the inevitable. He is preparing Terrence for dam-

aging assaults on his personhood by giving the boy a strategy, both practical and emotional, for dealing with the injury. He prepares Terrence for the emotional “pinch,” the psychic pain of racism. The owning of the word *nigger* as a symbol of camaraderie, of an in-group, to which the white boy is an outsider, is intended to remove some of the sting. Desmond invokes their membership in a larger undifferentiated black community even when the overall family project is for members to differentiate themselves from the vernacular culture that has reclaimed the word *nigger* as a proud part of black male identity.

The parents have differences about the strategic responses and actions for Terrence in the face of power. Both emphasize a strategy of individuation by setting oneself apart from the group. Being different from Blackness means behaving and being excellent, worthy. They have internalized the belief that a good part of the problem of black urban youth and their families lies with lack of individual effort. These assumptions emerge from their upwardly mobile, middle-class orientation:

I tell my son, the best thing you to do is to stay out of trouble. I think that's the best thing any black kid can do, because once you get in trouble, once you get into their tracking system which is the courts, the penal institution, then you're trapped, they know everything about you. Long as you can stay out of that system you pretty much can go.

Desmond's attitude is that it is essential for Terrence to swallow his anger. This fits with the school's position that individual “bad” behavior is what brings punishment down on your head. He subscribes to the notion that confrontations can be avoided and that fighting back is what gets you in trouble in the first place. The knowledge he imparts to his son is specifically targeted to the likelihood of encounters with the police. Terrence's work here is to perform a self that cannot be construed as threatening. Otherwise he is responsible for the consequences:

I think that the most important thing to teach any black man if they come in contact with the police—especially if they're white police, is to be as courteous as possible. The more courteous you are, the quicker you going to resolve whatever situation there is. If for any reason that you start smart-mouthing or acting tough, they going to look at you and say oh, okay, here we go again, another

threat. And they going to come down a lot harder. When it happens, you just have to roll with the punches and do what they ask you to do. Lay on the ground. They going to tell you to get on the ground, put your hands up. They going to humiliate you. Once you get past that, it's okay.

Desmond requires that Terrence as a rule practice an enactment of self as nonthreatening and avoiding physical confrontation. Arlene disagrees with this approach. She offers a stance that is more in keeping with the notion that you have to learn how to take care of yourself:

He's so afraid of what his father might do if he gets into a fight that he doesn't. He says the kids are always testing him. "Mom, what should I do?" And I tell him, I say, "If someone hits you, you smack him as hard as you can and they're not going to do it again." But my husband is saying, "No, I don't want you to fight." But on the other hand, from where I'm standing, kids are going to fight and I don't want my kid to be perceived as a big wimp!

She argues the importance of Terrence standing up for himself and fighting back. When he comes to her for advice about dealing with his peers who challenge him to fight, she urges him to give as good or better than he gets. This is both about the construction of self as well as appraisal by others. Arlene is afraid her son will not be perceived by others as sufficiently masculine, but also that he will not have developed the necessary accoutrements of masculinity. She is concerned that training for passive submission to symbolic or physical violence will hinder his move into manhood; that not only will he be characterized as ineffectual, but that he will be ineffectual.

Eddy, one of the Troublemakers, is also prepared for dealing with racism by his father, Karl, who uses a different approach than Arlene and Desmond. Eddy lives with Karl, who is black, his stepmother, Sheryl, who is white, and his younger brother and sister. Karl is on disability insurance because of a back injury, and Sheryl describes herself as a homemaker. She is on welfare. Karl has raised Eddy and his brother since they were small.

Karl is convinced that it is crucial for black kids to learn how to take care of themselves. "I try to teach them, you go out of my door, reality hits. I'm not going to baby you up in here because life is not

goin'ta baby you out that door." He warns his son: "I tell Eddy, you going to be filled with prejudice in your life. Prepare yourself. There's no way around it." Eddy's family does not have the resources to shield him in the world. His father reiterates the message that Eddy should strive to be the best, but seems to have given up on school as a route to success. He sees baseball, which is what the twelve-year-old is good at, as the route to the boy's adult achievement. The family attends all of Eddy's games and speaks enthusiastically about the boy's prowess.

Karl talked about preparing Eddy for inevitable and perilous encounters with the police. He drew on his own experience to make a connection with the national spectacle of the Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police:

Personally I have some real messed-up instances with the police in which I was definitely the victim and I really got messed up feelings. Like that thing with Rodney King. I was one of them. It still bothers me. They beat me, they beat me. They didn't have no proper cause whatsoever. It was about twelve o'clock at night. I seen three guys dart out there with some guns. By the time I run I hear, "Police, police!" So my mind is clicking. So I stop. They come round that corner, they stomp me. They beat me till I couldn't walk.

Karl explained how the police took him to jail, held him overnight. When he went before the judge the next day, he was released without being charged. He frames his encounter not as an isolated incident, but contextualized through the Rodney King beating. He sees his own experience not as a consequence of his own behavior, but as part of a much larger pattern of police treatment of black men. This assumption on his part is supported by a 1993 study carried out by the California State Assembly's Commission on the Status of African-American Males that finds that 92 percent of the black men arrested by police on drug charges were subsequently released for lack of evidence or inadmissible evidence.⁵ Karl does not suggest to Eddy that there are things Karl might have done that created the situation. His, he teaches, was a collective, not an individual, experience.

Horace, the Troublemaker who became my research assistant, has

5. Cited in Miller, *Search and Destroy*, 8.

learned strategies for dealing with the world through direct observation and emulation as well as from family. He is a fighter, both verbally and physically. This gets him into trouble in school. As I get to know his mother, Helene, I realize that he has learned from this tiny white woman how to stand up for himself and how to challenge people who have power over you. He is conscious of this model because he describes his mother as the person he most respects:

I know she be real mad at me when I get in trouble in school, but I know she'll go to the school board, right to the very top to protest if she thinks it's unfair how they treat me. I don't know how she does it. She's little [he pauses thoughtfully], but she makes people listen to her.

Horace and his two siblings live with their mother in a shabby apartment building about a mile away from the school. There are many drawbacks to living there. The building is rat-infested, hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Helene's fantasy is to be able to move out of the city to the suburbs, where she will have nice neighbors and her children won't have so many "negative influences in the schools."

The chances of this happening, however, are slight. The family is barely surviving on her income as a nurse's aide. The rent is relatively low because it is regulated by the rent control laws of the city. Helene is in a continuing battle with the building's owner, Mrs. Kwon, to hold her to her legal obligations to keep the building in good repair. She is convinced that Mrs. Kwon would like to find an excuse to evict her so she could renovate the building and raise the rents. I discover all this one day when Helene shows me documents from a bulging file that are letters back and forth between herself, the owner, and the city rent board. She asks if I will come and be "moral support" for her at mediation hearings that are being held because she has refused to pay rent for several months until repairs agreed upon previously have been completed. The landlord is demanding she pay up or be evicted.

I have included the following account of the rent board hearings in part because they illustrate the anxieties about basic necessities that are a part of the real world some children experience and that shadow their school day, but also because the hearings emphasized so dramatically for me a number of observations that I had already made about power and trouble. First was the power of institutional language and form to

disable oppositional voices as unreasonable, out of control, illegitimate. Second was the fact that a boy who might be a Troublemaker in the context of school could be identified as an exemplary figure in other contexts and act accordingly. Finally, the struggle to procure and maintain basic necessities such as a roof over one's head makes troublemaking essential for survival.

Horace is there at the hearings as "moral support" too. Helene has chosen him as the family member to act as witness to some of the claims and counterclaims that are being made. She describes Horace as "the one I can depend on. More than any of my other kids."

The rent board hearings go on for a couple of hours. I find the proceedings frustrating and disheartening. I had expected a procedure similar to the conflict resolution process at the school in which each side tells their story with the mediator acting as facilitator. Perhaps this is how it might have worked if the owner's lawyer had not been there. The lawyer, however, manages to dominate the meeting. Using the language of the law to rule on what is "admissible evidence," he determines what is said, when it is said, and by whom it is said. The city's mediator is no match for him; he is a petty bureaucrat without the tools to take charge. Sometimes I suspect him of being in cahoots with the landlord, sometimes I assume that he is just ineffective. This is the operation of institutional power at its most visible. I am stunned as the lawyer virtually blocks Helene's story down every avenue she takes to tell it. She is made to look like a hysterical woman who is, in fact, obstructing the repair work. Mrs. Kwon, the owner, appears eager to do everything she can to make the place livable if only her crazy, obstructive tenant would allow her.

The lawyer does worse than silence Helene. She is made to seem disruptive, out of control, wasting the precious time of everyone else sitting around the table. Her attempt to tell her side is continually framed as irrelevant or out of order. On the other hand, he skillfully manages to talk almost all the time; he is able to interrupt her with impunity. When I finally point this out, I, too, am silenced because I, too, have spoken out of turn.

Horace looks glum. He sits quietly, intensely taking it all in. He has been asked to testify a couple of times by his mother. He is the only one of the three of us at the hearing who has in fact not gotten in trouble, not spoken "out of turn." His side has not made much of a showing. Horace is a witness for his mother, but he also witnesses her humil-

iation in this setting of institutional power. Formal, specialized language and knowledge systems hold sway; we do not have the words, the phrasing, to command respect. Someone else makes, knows, and adjudicates the rules. Helene and I are like children in the classroom, silenced or disruptive because we cannot speak the “language” of the courtroom. In the final analysis, however, Helene scores a small temporary victory. The landlord agrees again to make certain repairs after which the back rent as well as an increase in rent will be paid.

For Horace and his mother the possibility of eviction from a seedy apartment is an ever-looming reality. Horace cannot be shielded from that possibility. He must act as witness on behalf of his mother. He observes what they are up against when he sits with her through the rent board hearing. He observes that she must engage in tactics that are “impolite,” disruptive, in order to be heard and to win even small concessions.

The Haven of Childhood

The boys are alerted by family to the dangers of “the real world” for black males through admonitions, object lessons from direct personal experience, and electrifying moments such as watching the videotape of Rodney King being beaten senseless by the police. The constant reiteration of this danger and the need to be on guard or to handle dreadful encounters themselves saturates their daily journeys through school and neighborhood. Throughout my interviews and conversations with them, I heard the strong undercurrent of fear flowing beneath their talk. The very boys who were being constituted in school and in the media as demonic, terrifying, and unsalvageable were themselves fearful.

What I mean by fear is not the individualized, psychological anxieties that stem out of a personal trauma. Though expressed individually, this fear is a reflection of the social terror that arises out of a group condition. It is the emotional space C. Wright Mills describes as the intersection of “the personal troubles of milieu” and “the public issues of social structure.”⁶ This social terror permeates the daily life of which the school day is a part. It constitutes the feeling component of the popular, illegitimate knowledge that the boys bring into school, which

6. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 8.

informs their practices, their relationships, what they accept as truth, what they shut out, suspect, question, or challenge. Young African American males who are a scary alien presence for adults on the street, whose very presence signals not only that you are in a “bad” neighborhood, but who actually are among the elements that define a bad neighborhood, are also terrorized.

Donte, a fifth-grade “Troublemaker,” powerfully evoked for me his consciousness of the vulnerability of childhood. He is one of the African American boys who was being redefined into the category of “unsalvageable” as his teacher assessed which of the children in her classroom would most benefit from her limited time and energy. Donte’s teacher describes him this way:

There were other children in the classroom who seemed like if they had a little bit of attention they would take off. So I thought, okay, maybe I should give them that little bit of attention. And in those cases it’s really working. Because Donte is going to be more of a full-time job to really sit there, see that he follows through, be there the next day to see that he turns it in, and be there to reinforce the good or reinforce the negative. But it is a choice that he is making not to work.

She rationalizes her own dilemma under conditions of triage by placing the onus on Donte—he made the choice, not she—rather than on the conditions of work for both adult and child that have forced the choice on both of them.

During my conversations with Donte, his voice was soft, his answers hesitant. He seemed shy, afraid of talking to me at first. His answers were monosyllabic “uhhns” or “yeses.” The only time he lost his shyness and the words came without hesitation was when he described his concern about “the lost children.” His neighborhood, he tells me, is a bad neighborhood with a lot of bad people. Maybe one of those people has kidnapped one of the lost children and they are living close by. When I ask him who the “lost children” are, he reminds me of the faces of missing children that I have seen on the side of milk cartons, the posters at bus shelters, the warnings on the side of grocery bags.

Donte believes that if someone pays attention to the faces of the children who are lost they have a better chance of being found. He cuts

the pictures of the children out, one by one, from the milk cartons and puts them up on his refrigerator with tape. He memorizes their faces just in case he might see them one day. He would recognize the child and rescue him or her. He tells me that sometimes he worries that he could be kidnapped just like one of those kids, but he notices that most of them are white. He spends time imagining ways he would escape if he got snatched away by some strangers.

In the “bad” neighborhood context, learning to take care of yourself, to stand up for your needs, to dodge, hide, and protect yourself is paramount. But in collecting the pictures of “lost” children, Donte is pinpointing something that is more than a local condition; the photographs of the missing children make a global connection between youth. A warning to be careful, for adults are dangerous. This is the vulnerability and fear of even the most protected children living in “good” neighborhoods. But for children like Donte, who regularly witness the inability of the adults in their lives to provide safe havens, to successfully champion their cause in school, their vulnerability to a horde of powerful and terrifying adults looms ominously.

The prevailing image in our society of childhood is that it is a separate and distinct phase from adulthood when one is shielded from adult worries about survival. Children, in this ideological construction, are afraid of monsters, of the dark, but these fears are chimeras born out of the active, creative imaginations of childhood. In this scenario the role of adults is to assure them that they will be protected, that their fears are groundless. There are no monsters, no dangers lurk in the dark. Donte’s mother, Mariana, lamented the fact that her son and daughter were unable to be “children” in this way. Growing up in a “bad” neighborhood means that the idealized image of childhood as a carefree stage of life is an unattainable condition. She deplores the fears that her children feel when they have no money:

And they look at me like—what you going to do, Mom? But when they worry, I worry. Because I can tell when they feel *fear*. I tell them it’s okay, Momma’s going to take care of it. I don’t know how, but—I let them know not to worry. Let me carry the burden, don’t do this to yourself, you’re young.

Mariana, who has a part-time job and some public assistance while she studies for her GED, still fantasizes the possibility of playing out

idealized roles in the family where adults free children from everyday worry. In her circumstances, however, she does not have the money to shield her three children from her always-present anxieties over basic necessities.

A childhood constituted within this context of vulnerability also anticipates adulthood in a different way. I heard over and over the fear of growing up expressed in the most tangible symbol of moving toward adulthood: going to junior high school. Adults as well as kids repeated the belief that things would be very different when kids entered junior high school; that kids were being given a lot of leeway in elementary school, which was like a dress rehearsal for the real performance that was for keeps. In junior high, rather than the special dispensation they presently got, the consequences of their work would be “real.”

I heard this worry for the first time from Horace’s mother. She was paying for her son to go to a private after-school tutoring program because she worried that he would be lost when he got to junior high, when tracking began in earnest.

I heard the warning issued by Mrs. Deane, Horace’s teacher, one day when the three of us were having a conference about how I could best help Horace as a tutor. Mrs. Deane explained to me that any improvement was up to Horace. She asks him how he did on the math test that day. He says, “Not so good.” She searches for a copy of his test on the table where all the children have turned in their work. He has not handed his in. Reluctantly he fishes it out of his desk where he has hidden it from the light, folded up in a small square.

Once unfolded, the test makes clear why he has hidden the work away. Horace has done very few problems. The teacher turns to me as if Horace is not sitting right next to both of us.

TEACHER: Next year Horace will be in seventh grade. I worry for him in seventh grade. If you didn’t turn a test in like this in seventh grade, no one would be giving you a second chance. What would you have gotten in seventh grade, Horace?

HORACE (VERY SOFTLY): An F.

Another one of the boys, Jabari, expresses a further aspect of this fear of leaving childhood behind that is symbolized by entering the seventh grade and being inducted into a less secure environment. He is afraid of the violence so often reported in the newspaper and on television:

There's a lot of people today that are so afraid of going to seventh grade. I'm afraid to go to seventh grade. They bring guns to school. They're a lot of kids that bring guns to school. There's this boy named Joey. He got five days suspension for bringing Mace to school because he was scared. He can't fight. . . . There's this boy named Freddie in my class was fixing to beat up Joey and Joey was going to spray him with some Mace. So he gave it to Michael to hold for him so he wouldn't get in trouble. But Michael got caught and Joey got caught. Joey got five days suspension and Michael is in Juvenile Hall for a week.

Fear of having to fight and of guns and the urge for self-protection gets three friends into serious trouble.

There is no protection, no haven for childhood in this context of social terror. The boys observe that their parents when engaged in confrontations with school adults and public officials are a weak force face-to-face with institutional power. Children know that they have to learn how to take care of themselves, how to defend themselves. Friends become an essential line of defense and solidarity in navigating the hostile expanses of the public space.

The Importance of Friends

It is significant that *homies* has come to be a word that indicates friends and peers in contemporary black male youth culture.⁷ *Homies*, or *homeboys*, constructs friends as home, a place of mythic and real security. Friends become as family, those who come from the same place of origin that you do, referencing shared conditions and experiences. At the same time, home becomes mobile, not a fixed space but multiply resident in those peers with whom you can "feel at home," "be at home."

The expansion of kin networks to incorporate friends into family

7. A brief history of the usage of *homie* and *homeboy* is provided in Frederic G. Cassidy, ed., *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1065. *Homie* was used in the 1940s to designate a rural southern immigrant to the urban North, carrying with it the connotation of being a rustic or countrified person. In the late 1970s, "'home boy' refers either to someone from Harlem, Watts, or some other equally black community or to one's best friend." Its use has become part of popular parlance in hip-hop culture.

is not new to African Americans. Since enslavement, African Americans out of necessity and by choice have constructed family broadly with more flexible, inclusive boundaries than the traditional nuclear or even extended family.⁸ Networks of kin, some related by blood, or marriage, some “fictive,” were established to mobilize and maximize the limited material resources and social power of the individual members.⁹

But the term *homies* suggests a new, creative adaptation by youth to the already permeable boundaries of family under contemporary conditions. It speaks to their intensely felt need for networks that provide security and solidarity in the public arena as family itself seems increasingly unable to provide this support. Homies take on characteristics of community as well as of kin. In addition to the natural social urge of humans to be with peers, homies provide a show of group solidarity and strength in a deleterious context.

This imperative for friends among youth occurs in the face of the public perception of young black men in a group as threatening by their very presence and the concern of school and family that friends lead boys astray. The boys’ need is to be out in a group. The group is seen as a threat.

Friendship is a fruitful relationship to explore in terms of the place it occupies in the trying out of alternative identities as passages to power and understanding. Homie is itself a sexed identity, connoting male bonds. Like the usage of the term *nigger*, it also references class location: the home referred to, the place of mutual origins, and the source of identities is the ghetto, the “bad” neighborhood, the black community.

I asked the boys who their friends were and what they looked for in a friend. One of the most frequently cited qualities was that friends were like yourself. So for starters, they are all male and, with one exception, African American. Friends also have qualities that you pride in having yourself. Kenny, a fifth-grader, told me, “All my good friends play football, just as I do.”

Friendship is one of the key sites for trying out selves. Identities are performed and tested, reputations are constituted in a continuing cycle

8. Sudarkasa, “African-American Families”; Andrew Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

9. Stack, *All Our Kin*.

of presentation and response, testing for evidence of caring and trust, how far you can depend on someone else. At this age, the friends that the boys talked about were all males. The group, because it inspires feelings of power and self, encourages testing and grading each other.

Friends fight. They fight when they think they're better than somebody else, when they think they're better than each other. Every friend usually competes. Like girls compete by how many boys they get or how good they look or stuff like that. And boys say how tough they are and, you know, stuff like that.

Friendship establishes boundaries that mark the group as being essentially masculine, and within the group there are pressures to conform to expectations of appropriate masculine behavior. Kenny explained that he did not want a friend who was "too much of a cry-baby," but he went on to describe the friend who was like that, but who is changing in response to teasing from his peers:

Any teeny-weeny little thing would happen, he would cry, and then he would go and tell his mommy and get her on the case. Sometimes me and him would get in arguments and stuff and then we would start to tangle a little bit and then he would start to cry and stuff, and then he would call his mom and then put all the blame on me. But he's changed. Yeah, he's changed a little bit. He doesn't cry as much. He doesn't go home and tell mommy anymore. I think people tell him that he was a nerd too much.

Friendship is a relationship that rarely cuts across race difference outside of school. Though Lamar has white friends at school, the friendship is not carried over into the world outside. He described one friend in particular who he played football with at recess. Because Tom is white, Lamar makes allowances for him and teaches him how to "act black" so that he will fit in and not get into trouble out of ignorance. He teaches him the fine points of "capping":

I never did think he knew how to cap right because we, like, cap on people. We like to joke around a lot. When we in our class or when we outside and then if he say something, it don't hurt me because it's funny, I just laugh. Nobody get offended by him. . . . When I'm

around Tom I tell him don't be scared to cap because nothing bad going happen to you. We just joking around. . . . I tell him, we don't say things about your mother. Like before we even start we say, don't talk about mothers or grandparents 'cause I don't like nobody talking about that. And we say, okay. And we don't talk about anybody's mother.

Lamar feels it necessary to explain to Tom not to be afraid to hang out with black kids and to participate in their making fun. But this friendship does not spill over into a neighborhood association. "Nah, we just do things during school. I don't have his phone number so I don't call him."

Friends lose the aspect of just being individuals as they begin to forge bonds. Friends provide the sociality, the group camaraderie that the boys yearn for. They are the people you do things with after school: play football or video games at the arcade, go to the movies, just play, do homework. Claude and his friends go to school together either on the bus or riding bikes. They also provide the impetus and moral support for cutting classes:

We talk about what we want to do. Everybody say what they want to do. Lots of things you can do instead of go to school. Like somebody say they want to go on the subway. If they say no, we get on the bus—if they don't want to get on the bus, we walk. One of my friends he goin'ta get a car, then we can drive.

Friendship is learning lessons about sociality and establishing and maintaining networks of care and affection, erecting boundaries that enclose the group in some modicum of the security of "we-ness." These networks become increasingly important to the boys as families and blood relatives and community organizations are less and less able to be present to provide the context of play, protection, and guidance.

Horace articulated a quality that most of the boys singled out as most important: loyalty. The notion of loyalty, of trust, and of reciprocity were themes in their description of friendship. "Like people who don't like to talk about you. They don't pretend they're your friend and the next minute you hear them talking about you like this and that."

Friends are there as a support system, they back you up, you can

count on them to back you up. Donte has had a friend since second grade. He lives right next door. "I expect him to be loyal, I can trust him." Claude described how friends act in a fight: "Like if when I get into a fight and somebody is going to jump them—I goin'ta help them. And if I get into a fight, somebody's going to jump me, they goin'ta help me." Security is found in a network of caring relations. As Dion put it, "If you get hurt, they'll care about you. Sometimes they get in fights and I try to break them up. They break me up. They definitely break me up."

This group support allows you to be yourself in ways that you might not be able to do alone. Friends help Dion, a boy who really doesn't want to fight, in his performance of masculinity as hot-tempered and bold but ready to get into the fray if he were not "restrained" by his friends. "I tell my friends—'man just hold me back, I don't want to fight. Somebody else just hold me back.' Because my friends know." On his own, Dion may be forced to prove himself by actually fighting.

Out in Public

Friendship groups become the solidarity support for negotiating the public space. Both Troublemakers and Schoolboys know that as young black males, even though they are still physically quite small, they become objects of fear and suspicion in public. Their presence in the group on the street, in shopping malls, commuter trains and buses makes adults uneasy. This "threatening" presence of adolescent black males on the street has been documented in other ethnographic work.¹⁰

The boys confront widespread hostility to their presence in public spaces. Shops have signs making clear that they expect youth—especially black males—to be thieves by advertising a limit on the number of children who can be in the shop at a certain time. Many of the boys described the experience of being followed around in stores by clerks who presumed they were there to steal something. More hurtful is that even when they enter businesses as customers their presence is stigmatized to such an extent that shopkeepers have strategies to get them off their premises as quickly as possible. Merchants maintain that the very presence of youth will drive away more desirable customers. As Horace

10. See, for example, Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose*.

put it: "They don't want us around, they just want to take our money."

A newspaper item describes this relationship. The article describes patrons at a local mall as "jumpy," "anxious," "uneasy," because of the presence of what the article describes as "primarily black teenagers" gathering at a bus stop near the entrance. The mall manager has gone to the city council to ask that the bus stop be moved away from the mall. The manager agrees that the kids "have done little to justify their fearsome reputation." But he points out, "You have to provide an atmosphere [for shoppers] that is not only safe, but is *perceived* as safe." The article quotes the executive director of a youth services bureau as saying that "when they [black youth] get on an elevator, they're used to people grabbing their purses or getting off at the next floor. They've developed coping mechanisms for being discriminated against because of their age and ethnicity."¹¹

These coping mechanisms involve processes of identification, the formation of self at the conjuncture of how one is seen and how one sees oneself. On one level, the boys treat the surveillance and fear as a joke, as flattering, a sign of their power to attract attention, be noticed. They heighten their effect by brazenly asserting their presence. They fill up sidewalks, occupy street corners, and invade "private" adult spaces. They act a part whose bodily styles and cool demeanor they learn from older youth, from popular films, from TV, and from music videos. This act can be momentarily rewarding, an emotional as well as a physical swagger. They threaten, misbehave, reciprocate in kind, displaying a power that reproduces the very stereotype of dangerous youth.

At another level, identities are constituted in relationship to the perceptions and expectations of other people. To be seen as a "beast" with a "fearsome reputation" incites one not just to play the role but to see oneself that way. To be recognized this way is to be, as Fanon put it, "Sealed into that crushing objecthood."¹² The danger is that in the desire for recognition, the subject of one's identification becomes the fantasmatic threatening figure of black masculinity. The act becomes the reality.

Yet another form of response is active critique and a challenge to—rather than a confirmation of—prevailing stereotypes and existing relations of power. Horace described one such action to me one day when I suggested we get an ice cream as we were passing a store selling frozen

11. *Express*, December 10, 1993.

12. Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 109.

yogurt. He explained that yes he wanted a cone, but we would have to go somewhere else because he was boycotting that store. Some weeks before, he and two friends had bought cones and were told by the person serving them that if they were going to eat at one of the tables in the store they would have to pay extra. So the boys said they weren't going to eat there, paid for the cones, then instead of leaving sat down at a table because, according to Horace, they knew that they were being charged extra because they were kids and she wanted to get rid of them. When the counter person ordered them to get out of the store, they replied that she didn't have the right to charge them extra because no sign was posted to that effect. The police were called and, as Horace put it, "acted big but know we ain't doing nothing wrong," so they left them there. With a grin of satisfaction, Horace recalled for me that they dawdled for over an hour over their cone. The owner who remained in the store watching them asked, "Do you always take this long?" They said, "No, only when we're dogged."

Horace learns in public, with family and with friends, the necessity of talking back to authority, to challenge power. His experience is that rules are contingent, that the kind of power you can muster to throw in the face of these rules is crucial. The performance of a tough masculinity is a fundamental part of this expression since the boys have little other power to muster.

Horace's ability and readiness to fight both verbally and physically has garnered a position of authority and respect for him among his peers. He explains to me one day that people look up to him. Horace means other kids in the school when he refers to "people," since he gets scant respect from school adults.

Some people come running to me instead of Mr. Russell [the vice principal]. Sometimes, they'll go tell me there's a fight going on, right. If I think this fight's right I'm not going to stop it 'cause if this boy do something to this other boy—then he got to face it. I let it alone.

The fact that other "people" come to Horace for help to sort out difficult situations on the playground is not a signal to the school that he has leadership qualities that can be fostered and channeled. It indicates just the opposite. Horace becomes an individual to be watched as he gets involved in an alternative authority structure. His charismatic

presence is seen as disruptive to the school's hierarchical order. The top-down system of administering power demands that children "tell an adult" who is invested with authority to judge and punish. This direct link between children unsettles the hierarchical reporting system that the school demands.

Another response involves having fun and challenging rules of social exclusion. Friends carry out "invasions" together. Claude explains what this means. "You know, like on TV when the army take over a place." Invasions are entering and making yourself known in a place that is strictly off-limits to kids. "You know, where they don't want you there. They keep you out. Like with guards." Moving into these spaces, occupying them for as long as you can with reasonable requests, is a way of making yourself visible, being seen, being noticed.

Claude described the invasion of the large recreation facility operated by the university across town. One evening he and a group of friends found an unsecured entrance to the building and got in. They cautiously made their way through the building doing their best not to attract the attention of the "guards." This dodging and making oneself as invisible as possible lasted for awhile, but that was not their intention. Finally, they found their way to the spot where they would make themselves visible, known. This was a small weight room on the second floor full of weights and exercise machines. They walked into the room and as two boys stopped to talk to the attendant at the door, the other three headed over and began examining and picking up weights. They scampered around, using the space and staying as long as possible without getting the police called. The goal is to be legitimately in the space even if only for a short while.

This form can be understood as a transgressive and delinquent act of trespassing on private property. It confirms the perception of gangs of kids roaming unsupervised, having fun without any regard for rules and authority. Yet if the wider social context within which this transgression occurs is introduced, the boys' act can be seen as redressing a fundamental social lack. The recreational facility that the boys entered has exactly the sort of equipment and services that does not exist in their own neighborhood that they could benefit from: a swimming pool, racquetball courts, weight rooms, fruit juice for snacks, adult professional supervisors. The boys in their own way are contesting their right to have access to the recreation that in our society today is available to only those who can pay.

Social Isolation: The Dangers of Friends

Parents find out what the boys have been up to with their friends when their forays result in the police being called. Because the group inspires feelings of commonality and strength, the boys are more likely to get in trouble in concert with others than when they are alone in public or isolated at home. So friendship is a field in which the work of family to shape and prepare kids for the future is visible. Adults consider the power and authority of friends as enormous and seek to control their kids through monitoring and regulating whom the boys socialize with. This is true for the parents of the Schoolboys as well as the Troublemakers. They believe that who the boys are hanging out with determines how they are seen, how they see themselves. Friends reinforce or undermine strategies for class mobility.

Families as well as school have developed strategies for sealing the boys off from bad influences. To different degrees, all the boys I interviewed were isolated, separated for their own protection from infection by the “criminal element” in the community. Isolation is a typical approach, especially in the case of single working mothers whose children have no adults in their life for the hours before and after school. The description of children considered “bad” influences are first and foremost descriptive of kids perceived as from the same or a lower social class. As with school, the use of black vernacular is one of the defining features of this undesirability. The imposition of quarantine attempted to cut the boys off from the “bad” influences of black popular culture.

Chris’s mother described herself as extremely vigilant about the outside influences that came into his life. She makes sure that he is always busy with organized activities:

What can I say, I run a tight ship. He doesn’t know much of this rock ‘n’ roll, rap music, in our house. Maybe he picks up some of it at school but we don’t have that music in our house. Sundays we’re playing church music before we go to service.

ANN: What about after school?

CHRIS’S MOTHER (SNORTS): He doesn’t have time for anything like that after school. He has one free afternoon—Monday. Otherwise, he’s playing baseball, soccer, he goes to tutoring. When he comes home he has homework, then the chores he has to do.

Thursday evening he's singing in the church choir. He doesn't have any time left over for all this bebop stuff and just hanging out with friends.

Families describe the characteristics of those children from whom they want to quarantine their own. These sound like the typical parental concerns about the other kids who lead their own children astray. Marilyn, Colin's mother, points out that

for some reason my children both love, I call it the wrong type of kid. But it's not really the wrong type of kid, 'cause if they're their age they're just kids. But kids that have more freedom than I let my kids have. And then because of that, then my kids also want to hang out and they want to come home at seven, eight, nine at night and that kind of stuff. And I don't like that because it's just too easy for something to happen. Even if they're on their normal path, regular time, they could get in trouble. I don't like that part.

However, the consequences that Marilyn fears are that Colin might get entangled in the juvenile justice system. Being with the wrong type of kid even if they have the same parental supervision can get you in trouble. Marilyn is a single parent who has a full-time job with the city. They live in a small, comfortable apartment. She worries about the fact that there is no adult around to supervise Colin, one of the Schoolboys, and his older brother when they come home after school on the days that they do not go to after-school tutoring that she must pay for. She is especially concerned about their association with neighborhood kids:

My rules are when you come home you can't open the door for anyone, of course. Nobody can visit. With kids you always have to say the whole thing because they always get you on things if you're not clear. They're always like, "Well, you said that they couldn't come in but you didn't say that I couldn't talk to them through the door or I couldn't talk to them out the window." Because my older son gave it to me all the time, so I learned how to be more specific and clear, so: "No, you can't open the door. No, you can't talk through the door. No one can stand on the porch when I'm not

here. Make sure all the doors are locked. All of them. Not just one lock.”

Arlene also isolates Terrence as much as possible from associating with the other kids in the neighborhood.

He is not a visitor! He pretty much stays in. There are kids right here in this neighborhood who he plays with but not with a great deal of frequency where he’s in and out of other people’s houses. I mean, I just don’t allow it. He isn’t allowed to visit anybody he wants whenever he wants.

She identified the wrong kind of friend when she described one of the neighborhood kids whom she discouraged Terrence from playing with:

There’s this little kid. I think he’s cute. The kid’s cute. He reminds me of what I saw when I was growing up. He’s that element of black urban life who’s been influenced by uncles, father whatever, but he’s picked up all the slang. You hear this boy talk—you have to take a second look y’know to make sure you’re not looking at a twenty-two-year-old kid ’cause he’s speaking like he’s been out on the streets a long time because he’s streetwise. But the kid is a poor student, academically he is not a good student. I don’t know what goes on in his home life because I do not have that kind of contact with his mom. But he’s a very cute kid and I like to hear him do his thing. But I don’t want my son to hang out with him. He’s a nice kid. He just hasn’t had the proper training or something.

The “right” kind of kid is apparently one who speaks Standard English, is a good student, has a supportive involved family. However, this “right” kind of kid as a friend can also produce dilemmas, especially if the friend is white. Helene’s discussion of Horace’s friendships is an interesting example of the complex ways in which the positive effects of friends from an upper-middle-class family living in a “good” neighborhood can be offset by class and racial privilege. Just as the effect of the rules is different for kids coming from different class backgrounds, assumptions about the real world are different in a racialized context. One context allows for the encouragement of social and cultural exper-

imentation and acquiring a diverse group of friends, the other demands “repressive” measures, a kind of house arrest.

Helene has worked hard to regulate and oversee the friendships of Horace. She has discouraged his friendship with Roy in spite of the fact that she recognizes that Roy’s own need for a family setting draws him to her house each evening and keeps him there in the relatively secure and stable setting of her small apartment.

He has six children in his home, his father is on disability because of an injury, and his mother is on AFDC. He is like magnetized toward me because he’ll come home after school every day with Horace and they’ll do their homework, and then about six-thirty or seven when I expect him to go on home, he’ll wanta stay later and later and later. And then I realize he doesn’t have the parents at home. I’ll say, “Don’t you need to call your parent, let your parent know where you are?” and he says, “Well, I don’t need to be home until eight-thirty.” I say, “In my home I have a rule that you can’t come every day after school. Once in a while, if there is a certain project you may,” I said, “but my son has to be in the home between five-thirty and six everyday. If he has a game that’s an exception.” And I said, “So you’re just going to have to leave.”

She is worried about his association with Horace. What kind of family does Roy come from if he can stay out after dark without calling home? Her judgment is that she’s sorry for him but she doesn’t want to encourage his friendship with Horace who she already has enough of a hard time making sure gets home.

Yet Helene has encouraged Horace’s friendship with Aron, who is a white boy from a well-off, professional family in the city. Aron is bused to the school. He lives in an area of beautiful, well-maintained older homes. Though Aron also lives in a mother-headed household, his lifestyle is very different because his mother is a well-known lawyer and his father is a professor.

Aron’s mother, Barbara, has an extremely busy and demanding schedule that involves her professional life as well as the many community and social action projects to which she is committed. Because she is a liberal, she is delighted that Aron, her only son, has made friends with Horace, who is black and comes from a poor family. She believes this is an important part of Aron’s learning to get along with a wide

variety of people. She also interprets his fondness for Horace as revealing admirable character traits in her son. He is not a snob. Barbara does not see his friendship with Horace as a negative influence. He has too many influences in his life. Her feeling is that the more diverse the experiences he is exposed to, the better for him. For Barbara, Aron's proper growth and development is nourished by his participation with a broad range of friends, and experimentation is basic to learning.

Barbara's encouragement of Aron's experimenting with lifestyles, with experiences, on the other hand, is one of the reasons that Horace thoroughly enjoys spending time with Aron. Staying overnight at Aron's house is always a treat. He has told me that Aron has his own large room with a big sign on the door, "Do not enter without permission." Furthermore, Barbara respects this sign and always knocks on the door that is kept closed. Moreover, she is usually not at home on weekend nights, or when she is she heads into her room with a book. The boys are on their own.

Through the careful surveillance that Helene never relaxes over Horace and what Barbara tells her proudly in conversations, she has deduced that the boys had smoked marijuana that Aron has gotten hold of; that they sneak out after Barbara is asleep. Aron is also invited to evening parties and Horace wants to go along. Barbara wants to encourage Aron to have girlfriends, the pressure here being for Aron to display the fact that he's becoming a man through his interest in girls. Helene on the other hand is anxious to put off any relationship that Horace might have with girls for as long as possible. Her two older sons left the house soon after they became sexually involved with girls. She associates sexuality with loss of interest in school. She is terrified of drugs. She explained to me:

It's one thing for Barbara to say she wants Aron to have as many girlfriends as he wants and to have fun. He's white, so it's different for him. She's a lawyer. If Aron gets into trouble, then she'll work it out. If Horace gets into trouble, then it's the police and I know where it will end.

Barbara is eager for Aron to go out and explore the world and learn about himself and others in the process. Helene is anxiously trying to isolate and control Horace's experiences for as long as she can.

The constitution of social identity through popular, local knowledge is a complex and many-faceted process. The popular knowledge is

developed through experience, observation, practice within a specific material and social milieu. This learning, because it is used and elaborated in concrete situations, seems more relevant to the Troublemakers than school knowledge. A significant component is the importance of challenging authority figures and handling situations without relying on an adult. Practices develop leadership skills as well as a certain respect for peer teamwork and group struggle. A milieu of terror and material deprivation structures the emotions and the experiences that Troublemakers bring to the school day. This knowledge and the structures in which it is embedded are the interpretive frames through which the kids make sense of encounters, practices, school rituals, curriculum, authority. It is the ground from which a reverse discourse about race and a sense of “groupness” springs.

The theories, the stance, the style of communication that the boys bring to school are strategies, tools, that are forged in the contexts of family and public. All the families prepare their sons to inhabit a world in which they are in danger—an “endangered species”—and inculcate them with forms of defense and survival. However, the quality and quantity of resources that families can count on influence the type of strategies and tools that are promoted. The Troublemakers are more likely to come from households with little to cushion their experiences. Based on their observations and personal experiences, they expect to be engaged in confrontations with authority, to be able to stand up for themselves, to talk back, to defend themselves physically.

Talking back, disruption, and disorder are too often the only style for getting heard. Horace, for example, learned from his mother, from his own experience, that to accept authority categorically, to give in without a struggle, is to lose fundamental necessities such as one’s money, one’s shelter, one’s self-respect. He learns these lessons in the ordinary setting of a yogurt store or a rent board hearing. The Schoolboys, in contrast, are more likely to come from families endowed with the financial and cultural means to provide protection. They can attempt to isolate and guard the youth from getting entangled in the system. Young boys are instructed in strategies of avoidance and enactments of submission. An approximation to a normative ideal figure is cultivated through modes of response to authority, forms of address and bodily styles. At the same time the differentiation from a black vernacular style is enforced as a strategy for producing boys who are “individually” different.