

chapter seven

unreasonable circumstances

To the real question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” I answer seldom a word. And yet, being a problem is a strange experience.

—W. E. B. DU BOIS, *Souls of Black Folk*

*By what sends
the white kids
I ain't sent:
I know I can't
be President.
What don't bug
them white kids
sure bugs me:
We know everybody
ain't free.
Lies written down
for white folks
ain't for us a-tall:
“Liberty And Justice”—
Hub!—for All?*

—LANGSTON HUGHES, “CHILDREN’S RHYMES”

Just a few days after the 1992 riots that followed the acquittal of the Los Angeles policemen who had beaten Rodney King, I overheard a conversation between a teacher and the PALS counselor in the hallway of Rosa Parks School. The teacher, a white woman, was deploring the behavior of an eleven year old African American boy, D’Andre, in her

class. During a discussion of the riots, some of the children had said that it was Simi Valley that should have gone up in smoke not South Central Los Angeles.¹ At this, the white student teacher, Laura, told the children that she had an uncle who lived in Simi Valley, to which D'Andre had retorted, "I'd burn his house down too."

According to the hallway account, Laura was extremely upset by this response. Her feelings were hurt that a child she had worked with closely in the classroom for almost a whole year would have said something so hateful to her. D'Andre was sent off to the Punishing Room for his remark. "You must do something about that boy's attitude," the teacher told the counselor. "He's such a hostile kid. He says he doesn't like white people."

This anecdote about D'Andre is a dramatic illustration of the way that "race" enters the school and structures the interactions of the school day. The story of D'Andre and the student teacher gives a glimpse of how processes of racial identification and group membership conflict with the school's discourse about difference as individual and getting in trouble as a matter of personal choice or individual pathology. Race is a highly charged nexus for identification and for generating theories about school failure and trouble. Troublemakers contest the school's claim to use neutral, race-blind criteria for judgments by articulating a counterdiscourse about a collective condition that contends that it is children's race that determines how punishment is meted out by school adults. They bring to the events of the school day knowledge and feelings about the racialized relations of power in the wider social world in which the school is embedded. They formulate a critique of the institutional racism that they encounter in school. This critique is expressed in a myriad of ways: obliquely through the adoption of bodily attitudes, style, clothing, and language, as well as directly through political action using confrontational tactics.

We will examine the social costs and benefits of racial identification. Positioning oneself as "raced" or as "raceless" simultaneously involves the playing out and expression of present class location as well as the engagement with or disengagement from anticipatory social mobility strategies. Schoolboys especially are faced with dilemmas of

1. Simi Valley is the predominately white Los Angeles suburb to which the trial of the Los Angeles policemen had been moved and where, it was reputed, a number of policemen and families lived.

racial identification that bear serious implications for their gender practice as well as render pathways for class mobility problematic.

The hallway story also captures the emotional ingredients—fear, anger, resentment, hurt feelings—that lie just under the surface and seethe into the open when race as a feature of social division enters the discussion. Unlike masculinity, race is a highly contested, inflammatory, politically charged category. School adults interpret public assertions of race identification by kids as rude, disruptive, and illegitimate, as personal attacks on their own probity. Kids bring feelings of anger and frustration about racial inequality gleaned from personal experience, from family, neighborhood, television, movies, and popular music to decipher struggles with authority figures.

Competing Frameworks: (Un)Reasonable Circumstances

Is D'Andre a rude, aggressive kid with an emotional problem? Or is his disruptive behavior "reasonable" when we take the "circumstances" and events surrounding the behavior into account? Let us look more closely at two disparate frameworks inherent in the D'Andre anecdote for different readings of the outburst. From the school's perspective, D'Andre's response is indeed disturbingly aggressive and antisocial. It contravenes several basic precepts that are widely promulgated: the proper way to resolve conflict is through established channels and verbal negotiation not through violence and lawbreaking; laws should be observed, and breaking them constitutes criminal activity; private property should be respected so that the act of burning down someone's house or, by extension to the events in South Central Los Angeles, looting and burning neighborhood buildings, is reprehensible behavior that should not be condoned. D'Andre's espousal of such tactics and his identification as someone who doesn't like white people reveals the distorted values and emotions of a psychologically troubled youth. The boy is referred to the counselor, a psychotherapist, for an attitude adjustment.

This standpoint is one that extracts children from the larger social and political context in which they exist and that they bring to school, treating them as individual actors in isolation. Within this individualized framework for understanding troubling behavior, the remedy involves the diagnosis and treatment of an individual and his problem. D'Andre is characterized as emotionally disturbed. From this psychol-

ogized perspective, he is one of a growing number of children whose disruptive outbursts are explained as a personality disorder. He could very likely be diagnosed as suffering from “Oppositional Defiant Disorder” (ODD), the illness recently “discovered” by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and described in the field note that precedes this chapter.² In fact, D’Andre displays the necessary four symptoms requisite for a diagnosis of this illness: “losing temper” (Criterion A1); “being touchy or easily annoyed by others” (Criterion A6); “being angry and resentful” (Criterion A7); and “being spiteful and vindictive” (Criterion A8).

The APA goes to pains to underscore the origins of the disorder as within the individual and not the result of external circumstances: “Usually individuals with this disorder do not regard themselves as oppositional or defiant, but justify their behavior as a response to unreasonable demands or circumstances.”³ So diagnosticians are instructed to discount the social environment and to reject any claims on the part of the individual that external forces have contributed to the problem. In fact, according to the wording the very making of this kind of claim is a clear symptom of the disorder.

Let us take the boy’s standpoint for a change. Let us situate the behavior within a specific and highly relevant social context. We shall take into consideration a few of the “unreasonable demands or circumstances” by which D’Andre might justify his behavior. Otherwise we cannot begin to understand or address his undeniably disruptive and hostile outburst.

When the teacher tells her story, the fact that D’Andre is African American and the student teacher is white is never mentioned, nor is the fact that Simi Valley is a predominately white, middle-class suburb of Los Angeles, and that South Central Los Angeles is an urban area with a concentration of poor and low-income black and minority residents. She treats these social distinctions as irrelevant details to her story. The only person in her account it would seem for whom race seems to matter is D’Andre, whom she reports as saying “he doesn’t like white people.” He becomes the sole bearer of a disturbing bigotry that sees people in terms of race rather than as individuals. He is presented as injecting a way of seeing the world into the discourse of the community that is otherwise absent.

2. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 91–92.

3. *Ibid.*, 92.

However, D'Andre's anger is both predictable and intelligible through a racial lens. He is bringing to school with him, along with schoolbag, textbooks, pencils, and paper, powerful feelings of anger, sadness, and fear after watching conflict and conflagration in Los Angeles on television for three days following the acquittal of the four white policemen whom he had watched on TV beating Rodney King, a black man, by an all-white jury in Simi Valley. The spectacle of King's savage beating had stirred up strong feelings of outrage in citizens across the nation. In D'Andre's neighborhood, where police harassment and beating of black men was not unusual but had just never been caught on videotape, feelings of anger were tinged by vindication and the unrealized hope of a national spectacle of justice and retribution at the climax of the trial of the police.

Undoubtedly, D'Andre and his family had spent hours watching television and talking about these events with mixed feelings of sadness, rage, and horror. Certainly in millions of households across the land, there was a feeling that as local neighborhoods were pillaged, vengeance was being wreaked against the wrong target. D'Andre identifies himself with the rioters, who not only look very much like his family and himself but who are facing similar social and economic problems. His explosion of feeling is based on his consciousness of the historic and social connection of black people in the United States, a connection recurrently forged through events such as the beating of King. A heightened racial identification is something that he and more than half of the children at Rosa Parks bring into school as an interpretive lens.

These kids come from a milieu in which race is a fundamental attribute of self not as an abstract circumstance but as a meaningful identity that must be taken into consideration at every step. The formation of black identity takes place within a mixed social and feeling context of pride, rage, shame. The sentiments that D'Andre expressed are not just representative of his personal feelings of disaffection but are grounded in a sense of group condition. It is this sensation of a groupness and a collective identity that some of the boys whom I got to know bring to school to counter the school's evaluation of them as antisocial individuals who are potential dangers to society.

The student teacher also takes sides by establishing her connection with the people of Simi Valley. This bond is both one of kinship and, what remains unstated, of race. She uses her classroom status as one of

the “good guys” to personify the point that it is individuals like herself who would be attacked; but D’Andre refuses to accept the substitution of individual difference for group status in the exchange. The student teacher demonstrates the invisibility of whiteness, of race as a position of power and privilege. This elision of group privilege and its recasting as individual in character is a fundamental aspect of the discourse of individual choice.

Individual Choice: Acting White

The school’s ubiquitous message is that success and failure is a matter of personal choice. This discourse is expressed in the school rules and in the verbal exhortations of adults to kids: “Success is up to you.” This could be an encouraging, motivational message. However, the homily obscures both the material and social constraints that prevent African American children from succeeding. The way school is organized to promote dominant cultural values and expressive modes favors the middle-class white minority students at the expense of the African American majority. Race and class make a difference in children’s chances for success at school.

In a racialized society such as the United States, the essential feature for maintaining white hegemony is the elevation of the physical and cultural attributes of whiteness: the dominant group becomes the standard against which “individuals” are measured. Children are individuated in relation to an idealized figure who is both white and middle class. To invest the dominant group’s way of life with the stamp of “ideal” or “norm” means that the subordinate group’s family patterns, language, relational styles are constituted as deviant, pathological, deficient, inferior. Blackness, as the Other, the outside category, becomes the racially marked presence that constitutes the norm, the seemingly raceless individual, by its very representation as undifferentiated. This apparent absence of race in whites, this presence as raceless, permits their cultural forms to be known as, even experienced as, individuality. The reproduction of the racial order in the United States today is made possible by the invisibility of operations that seem to be about natural dispositions and character rather than about racial fictions.

Children as astute observers are highly conscious of the adult signals that designate rank and status. For one thing, school adults are not

subtle or covert about these assessments, but openly assert their judgments. African American youth know that what they bring to school from family and community is seen as deficient, is denigrated, devalued. They know that their family background, their experience, their modes of expression—both verbal and nonverbal—are detrimental to their achievement, must be compensated for, even eradicated. As discerning observers and participants, the boys know they must be actively engaged in discarding or making up for these unbecoming elements of their biography. They must “make themselves over” to succeed in school and to accumulate the cultural capital that is the prerequisite for achievement. They must get rid of the unwanted baggage brought from the streets, the family, the neighborhood. They must shed the distinguishing features of “Blackness” by approximating whiteness, by acting white.

Ethnographic studies have recorded that this institutional imperative for children to “act white” in order to achieve success is known to black kids who use the phrase as a put-down of their peers who are doing well in school. For example, Fordham and Ogbu’s study of an all-black high school in Washington, D.C., reports that students forge a collective oppositional identity in the face of institutional racism.⁴ In this oppositional culture, school achievement is equated with “acting white”; being a “good” student is equivalent to losing one’s racial cultural identity. Black students who do well in D.C. high schools must develop strategies to deal with the accusations and pressures from others who perceive this academic prowess as “acting white.” What makes this racial policing seem so troubling is the not-so-subtle insinuation that for students to do well in school they must cut themselves off from blackness by positioning themselves as white. Indeed, the researchers suggest that fear of being accused of “acting white” by peers is a significant factor in deterring a number of youth from adopting the behavior required for success.

This research adds significantly to our knowledge about the crucial relationship between racial identification and school success, but the conclusions drawn are considerably weakened by a misplaced emphasis. There is overemphasis on the role of peers as the principle force holding back students. This emphasis tends to give credence to the notion that it is primarily African Americans who hold individual

4. Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, “Black Student School Success: Coping with the ‘Burden of Acting White,’” *Urban Review* 18, no. 3 (1986).

members back from success by constantly policing and ostracizing those who seem to be “bettering” themselves. It downplays the hegemonic power of the institution that operates through normalizing practices to push certain students to the margins and produce the condition in many of active “not-learning.”

There is overwhelming evidence from case studies and from autobiographical work that African American kids enter school not with an oppositional orientation at all, but full of promise and eager to learn.⁵ There is also evidence that somewhere early in the fourth grade this motivation and intense excitement about school learning dwindles, markedly so for African American boys, in what has come to be called “the fourth-grade syndrome.”⁶ This is the point at which African American males appear to begin to disidentify with school and to look to other sources for self-valuation. It is my contention that this diminished motivation to identify as a “scholar” is a consequence of the inhospitable culture of school that African American children encounter, rather than a consequence of peer pressure.

When the institution and not the peer group is understood to be determinate, the claim that “acting white” is a prerequisite for success becomes an insight *on the part of youth* into the normalizing techniques of the institution. The kids are in fact circulating a radical critique by recognizing and pointing out processes and relationships observed and elaborated by eminent social theorists who argue that schooling is organized to affirm, elevate, and valorize the cultural forms and expressive modes of the dominant group in society and to devalue those of the subordinate group.⁷ This theory emphasizes the reproduction of class relations through schooling. It propounds that success and social mobility, from this perspective, is dependent on the mastery of middle-class linguistic codes, lifestyles, disciplinary modes, and relational manners; that schools reflect the familial and neighborhood practices of upper- and middle-class students who fit smoothly into its forms of communication and social organization. These youth do not have to

5. For case studies see Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*; and Kunjufu, *Countering the Conspiracy*. For autobiographical work see Gilyard, *Voices of the Self*.

6. Kunjufu, *Countering the Conspiracy*.

7. See, for example, Basil Bernstein, “Social Class, Language, and Socialization,” in *Power and Ideology in Education*, ed. Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Pierre Bourdieu, “Symbolic Power,” in *Identity and Structure: Issues in the Sociology of Education*, ed. Dennis Gleeson (Driffield, England: Studies in Education, 1977), 112–19; and Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

make the kind of profound adjustments made by children from working-class and poor families. Black youth are pointing out a similar institutional relationship in the context of a racialized culture when they point out that “acting white” is a prerequisite for fitting in at school and is absolutely basic to any kind of success. This requirement ruthlessly excludes African American cultural modes as relevant and meaningful knowledge practices.

Language use is an excellent example of how the power to determine the standard operates to enforce white middle-class cultural forms as a prerequisite for school success and to present African American kids, especially black males, with difficult dilemmas of identification. The school demands the suppression of language brought from home and imposes Received Standard English as the sole legitimate form of expression as well as the sign of culture, intellect, and a commitment to bettering oneself. The use of Black English, on the other hand, signals both cultural and intellectual deficiency.

Because language is critical at several levels of the formation of subjectivity it is particularly fruitful for exemplifying the connections between the production and performance of conforming and alternative identities. Language is fundamental to the work of representing and constituting self. It bears traces of our geographic origins, the social class we come from, the history we share, our place in systems of power. We use it to express ourselves to others and to register what others say about us in a dynamic interplay and exchange of meanings. Through it we learn about ourselves as autonomous individuals as well as members of social collectives. We are not only produced by language, but we continuously reshape and re-create it under novel circumstances.

While children bring a rich variety of language systems into school, the institution imposes a profoundly restricted and jealously guarded monolingual system through the sanction of only one form, Received Standard English, as the legitimate form of expression and exchange in the classroom. Children who come from families who speak other languages such as Chinese, Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese at home are pulled out of the regular classroom for several periods a week for English lessons. Incredibly, their ability to speak and think in more than one language system is not presented to the school population as a marvelous accomplishment to be envied, emulated, applauded, but it is framed as a handicap, a problem to be corrected before their real education can begin.

Many of the African American children come to school speaking Black English. It is a language variant that is not recognized by the school; in fact, it was typically described by teachers at Rosa Parks School as “bad English” or as “ghetto talk.” Though Black English remains unrecognized by the school as an acceptable medium of communication, a number of sociolinguists and other scholars conclude that rather than being merely bad grammar, Black English is a full-blown language with a grammar and syntax of its own that emanates from and reflects the historical and lived experience of Americans of African descent.⁸ This is not to say, by any means, that all black Americans naturally use or speak Black English. There is great variation in our use of language; social class, for instance, influences whether a child grows up in a household where Received Standard English or Black English is the norm. Many are fluent in both and switch between the two, using Received Standard English in “white” settings, especially where one needs to downplay one’s Blackness to be acceptable, and Black English with family, with black friends, or in social situations where one wants to downplay class divisions and emphasize racial ties and unity.

The school actively seeks to suppress and eradicate Black English. “Ghetto talk” is seen as symptomatic of the ignorance, backwardness, and uncouth nature of the speaker. Children who use it are corrected, ostracized, and marginalized as dumb. Ironically, African American teachers in the school were the ones most actively engaged in enforcing the use of proper English; yet many of these teachers would themselves lapse into Black English as they conducted everyday conversations with their peers and talked to students.

The kids know that the use of Received Standard English is the absolute baseline for an active commitment to the school agenda. We can understand why they would choose to adopt this sanctioned language form. But why do some hold on to Black English and invite trouble in school? The choice is not by any means due to lack of exposure to the standard form as a result of social isolation or a culture of

8. See Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*; J. L. Dillard, *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (New York: Vintage, 1973); W. Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972); and June Jordan, *On Call: Political Essays* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), chap. 16.

poverty; they are exposed daily to Received Standard English through family, community, television, movies, and the classroom. Why do they choose to use a stigmatized language?

First of all, to exorcise “ghetto talk” and speak Received Standard English, especially in the early school years, does not entail a simple decision to speak “properly” on the part of black children. It involves a violent and painful assault on their very sense of self and on those with whom they most closely identify that can inflict long-term psychic damage to self-esteem:

Language . . . is also very important as a symbol of identity and group membership. To suggest to a child that his language, and that of those with whom he identifies, is inferior in some way is to imply that *he* is inferior. This, in turn, is likely to lead either to alienation from the school and school values, or to a rejection of the group to which he belongs. It is also *socially* wrong in that it may appear to imply that particular social groups are less valuable than others. . . . The fact must also be faced that, in very many cases, speakers will not *want* to change their language—even if it were possible.⁹

In this atmosphere of denigration of what one brings to school, many black children are forced to choose between identification with school or with family and social group. To accept the superiority of one means rejecting the value of the other, so a decision must be made to adhere to one source of knowledge and become alienated from the alternative.

Most children become bidialectal or bilingual, switching back and forth between the two systems. But there are severe psychological costs involved in the effort to negotiate both. Keith Gilyard, in a moving account of his own childhood acquisition of language and literacy, reflects on the severe psychic strain that black children undergo as they try to fashion selves in both worlds. In a poignant illustration of Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness,” Gilyard describes how he decides to use another name, Raymond, as the one he will use in school in an act of psychic survival:

9. P. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 80–81.

Nobody had ever called me Raymond before. Uptown it was always Keith or Keithy or Little Gil. Raymond was like a fifth wheel. A spare. And that's what I decided to make these people call me. They cannot meet Keith now. I will put someone else together for them and he will be their classmate until further notice. That will be the first step in this particular survival plan. Of course it wasn't thought out in those specific terms, but the instinct and action were there. And from that day on, through all my years in public school, all White folks had to call me Raymond.¹⁰

He points out that this work of "splitting" in order to survive under the duress of maintaining two identificatory systems took a toll on his schoolwork. The cause of this change was unrecognized by the school, which looked to family problems for the explanation:

My teachers in Queens could not appreciate just how hard I worked to fit in socially or how effective I actually was at finding a niche that would be acceptable to the class as a whole. By the end of the third grade, in addition to the marks indicated above, my occasional resentment of group control and my occasional evading of responsibility had become constants. Also, that my relationship with my parents seemed disturbed was duly noted. Unfortunately, the only conclusion they drew from them was that I needed "supervision." They were nowhere near the whole truth about me, which was, in short, that I was showing some cracks under the strain of all the various role-playing I was engaged in. Nonetheless, I held myself together enough emotionally to handle the academic requirements of those one-level classes.¹¹

A second reason for holding on to Black English is eminently practical. Language is not only a vital aspect of enunciating self; it emanates from a specific historical context as a medium for coping in one's social and material environment. Perkins contends that black children use it because it is more in harmony with the milieu in which they must survive compared with Received Standard English that does not provide them with the pliable speech they need to navigate the locale. The child "makes no effort to emulate so-called standard language because it acts

10. Gilyard, *Voices of the Self*, 43.

11. *Ibid.*, 66.

as a conduit for articulating a way of life which is inconsistent with his own.”¹²

The choice to use Black English as one’s primary mode of communication, therefore, is grounded in several decisive moments for the African American child. It serves as a means of self-identification and an assertion of one’s group identity. It reflects a commonality of social experience enabling one to negotiate and cope in a specific milieu. When spoken it vociferously announces one’s rejection of the school’s strategies that erect barriers of social distinction between self and family. This choice, however, is not made freely, but under severe duress. The enforcement of a language hierarchy can therefore be considered a crucial “external circumstance” to be taken into consideration as we seek to understand the effect of racial identification on school commitment.

Identification: Double Consciousness

For African Americans, “race” as an identity and as a nexus of identification has never been theorized or experienced as a simple, unitary, decontextualized subject position. At the beginning of the twentieth century—long before the poststructuralist discovery of the socially invented, multiply positioned, nature of “self”—W. E. B. Du Bois was describing the African American experience of self as unstable and dualistic.¹³ Blacks identified both as Americans, as “citizens,” and as a racially subordinated minority that was excluded politically and socially. This “double consciousness,” as he described it, has served as the matrix for identification as “black” culturally and politically, grounding a culture of resistance and struggle against denial of the full rights of “citizens” because of “race.”

Identification with and through “Blackness” is itself split through the work of representations. Blackness is doubly constituted: as systematically demeaning, derogatory, and dehumanizing through the representational system of the dominant social order; as well as resourceful, creative, diverse through the cultural production of black communities. This splitting means that on the one hand, black identity is always refracted through the norm—whiteness—and inscribed with distort-

12. Useni Eugene Perkins, *Home Is a Dirty Street: The Social Oppression of Black Children* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1975), 30.

13. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*.

ing, disfiguring images the internalization of which results in a self-hatred that often manifests itself in an uneasy, ambivalent embrace of whiteness.¹⁴

On the other hand, subordination is the site of resistance in Du Bois's original formulation and that of subsequent African American scholars.¹⁵ The position of Outsider becomes the vantage point for the production of a powerful critique of the social order and can foster a self-representation that contests the order as it stands. It is a position that is "a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but habits of being and the way one lives."¹⁶

Schoolboys and Troublemakers manifest this duality, this peculiar mixture of embrace and rejection. All of those I interviewed were physically identifiable as African American, though the wide differences in skin color and hair type manifested the rich diversity of people who identify as black in the United States today. All were identified in the school records as black. How did they identify themselves? When I asked the boys to identify themselves in terms of their race, the typical self-description was African American and/or black. But, there was a strong tendency for Schoolboys to identify themselves as multiracial or to distance themselves from the concept of race as a meaningful form of social distinction. Ricky, for example, described a preference for a race-blind language that invoked the school as his authenticating source for this definition:

I just think of myself as a human being. Like our teacher was discussing like there's really no such thing as a black or a white race. White—that's just like a color and black is a color. African American, that's what people call black. So like I really don't like to think of others like that. So I have to say—a human being. On a test or something like that I'd say African American.

14. Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*; also Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965). Kenneth Clark argues that "Human beings who are forced to live under ghetto conditions and whose daily experience tells them that almost nowhere in society are they respected and granted the ordinary dignity and courtesy accorded to others, will, as a matter of course, begin to doubt their own self worth" (63–64).

15. For example, Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; and bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

16. hooks, *Yearning*, 149.

While Ricky sees himself as “officially” black in terms of filling out forms, he rejects the notion that race is a meaningful social category in practice. He is critical of using it as a form of differentiation. Izrael, another Schoolboy, also eschewed black and white as categories for pigeonholing himself. He was proud of his mixed racial heritage when he described himself as Cherokee Indian, white, and black.

Schoolboys were more likely to make the link with being black and black culture in an abstract sense removed from their own daily experience. Tyrone, for instance, said that he preferred to be called African American rather than black, “because that’s the mother land—Africa. It means that they was like the first people that was living on the earth. Because Adam and Eve was black.”

In contrast, none of the Troublemakers identified themselves in multiracial terms, even though two of them came from households with white mothers, while a third boy who was extremely light-skinned clearly came from a mixed-race household. The Troublemakers were also more likely to talk of race as a tangible factor in their present existence. Jamar described racial identification as a feature of his everyday life when he mentioned church and being black as the two things that he “would never be afraid to stand up for.”

Identification as black, even for Troublemakers, was not a total and seamless attachment. The discourse of individualism and choice ran through all of their explanations, especially when it came to describing their own life-chances. Along with the notion that race made a difference, they positioned themselves as agents of their own futures in a society in which “you can be whatever you want to be, as long as you work hard for it.” They bring this image to their preparation for future careers.

Identification is a process of marking off symbolic boundaries through embodied performances of self that call up and draw on idealized figures and cultural representations as a reference to one’s rightful membership and authenticity. Identification in this sense is a series of public acts of commitment to a subject position; this performance is fraught with anxiety about loss of self through exclusion and banishment as an outsider relative to that position. Both Schoolboys and Troublemakers work at these public acts of commitment, Schoolboys in visibly demonstrating attachment to school; Troublemakers demonstrating their disidentification with school through performance of Blackness that emphasizes their attachment to a raced subject position.

Before examining the differences between the Schoolboys and Troublemakers, I want to emphatically underscore the fluidity and lack of permanence of these two identities even as I invoke them for analytical purposes. Boys who are Troublemakers in school can be highly disciplined, obedient, and mindful of authority in specific contexts in school (jazz band, for example) and out of school (the baseball team). While it is extremely difficult to be recategorized from Troublemaker to Schoolboy, the latter are highly vulnerable to demotion to Troublemaker. The dilemmas of self-fashioning and tensions around group identification and commitment that Schoolboys face are not easily resolved and intensify in junior and senior high school, where many of them join the ranks of the Troublemakers.

Balancing Acts: Schoolboys

The Schoolboys are discussed first because their patterns of behavior and the dilemmas of subjectivity that they face reveal pressures and strains that boys now categorized as Troublemakers may have already faced and resolved. The Schoolboys work at conforming to the school's linguistic and relational codes in order to be seen as committed to the school's agenda. They are concerned with enactment of the details of fitting in, with achieving on the school's terms, with not getting into trouble. This means distancing themselves from "Blackness," which is represented as trouble and the disruption of order. While they do not labor under the burden of negative expectations from the school adults, their performative work is nonetheless difficult and emotionally taxing. Stressing one's identity as a human being or one's multiracial antecedents dilutes that part of yourself—the black part—which is defined as a problem.

Schoolboys must work to strike a balance between the expectations and demands of adults and peers in and out of school. They experience psychic strain as they weave back and forth across symbolic boundary lines. The ability to "act white," to perform the citational acts of that identity, is a tactic of survival, and a passport to admission to the circle of children who can be schooled. This difference may be rewarded in school by the adults but can be a problem in the construction of self among one's peers and with family and community outside the school. To perform this act too realistically, to appear to adopt whiteness not as a guise but an identity, is seen as an expression of self-hatred and race

shame. The kids define this distancing oneself from Blackness as a loss of self-respect. Kids who perform “whiteness” too well, without any black undertones, are viewed dubiously by their peers. As Jamar pointed out,

There’s a lot of people—they black, right—they’re like ashamed. They act white and stuff like that. If you black, you should be black. It’s not any people out there who’s white is ashamed of being white. They want to act like they are.

Ricky’s mother worried about how his participation in his extended family or in the more abstract community of Blackness had been affected after he spent four years in a small private school in which he was the only African American pupil:

When he’d go around his cousins—and I’m from a large family—he was always kinda made fun of because he spoke differently from the rest of the kids and he was like [she hesitates for several seconds, then laughs, embarrassed] white! But black! And I’m looking at this big tall kid and I told my husband, you know we really have to do something, make some changes here because that is not the real world that Ricky is in.

The change was to remove him from the private school and enroll him at Rosa Parks. Unlike Ricky, who identifies himself as a human being, his mother believes that because others will see him as black he must be prepared for a reality in which his race will make a difference. Ricky’s mother, Shirley, went on to describe how the way he spoke differentiated him from other children in public school:

There were some things like picking up the bad language. I mean not bad language like profanity, I mean bad language like bad grammar, dialect, and all of that. I didn’t like that. One time he came home, that was when he first started public school, and he said, “Mom, you know what this kid said to me?” He was making the point that the kid spoke bad English. And so he was repeating what the kid said. “Isn’t that funny?” he said. And I thought, golly, well, this is public school, the real world! Another time, he told me, “A kid said, ‘I got a dollah! I got a dollah!’ Mom, he didn’t say

‘dollar,’ he said ‘dollah.’” I thought, oh Lord and told him, “Well, don’t you say anything!”

Because language is a significant marker for distinguishing “whiteness” and “Blackness,” Shirley assumes that racialized difference is a feature of the “real world” inhabited by Ricky. She works to prepare him for it. Private school will give him access to the “cultural capital” symbolized through language use and demeanor that will make possible his upward mobility. On the other hand, she is concerned that Ricky has become estranged from an identity that knits him to family. Though diversity of language use has long been a feature of class divisions in black communities, language has become a marker of some racial solidarity, even for the middle class. His isolation from other black kids in a private school has meant that he has not acquired even the bicultural skills and interpretive frame to move back and forth between the worlds of the school and that of the family. By the end of the sixth grade, Ricky’s parents have decided to send him back to private school because they feel that he has begun “falling behind” in public school. The strategies of class mobility as survival supersede notions of the importance of family and racial group solidarity.

In this delicate balancing act, a boy’s multicultural mode of identification that blurs lines of difference helps to resolve the conflicting expectations from schools, peers, and family. It is both an expression of internalization of the institution’s discourse of racelessness as well as a liberatory critique. As a critique it affirms the multiple possibilities of human connection and the many communities in which we learn about self and other. But the liberatory aspect of the insight is weakened by the context in which it is formulated, which enforces a hierarchy in the range of possibilities of becoming and being variously human. Under these circumstances, a multicultural mode of identification is more likely taken up to dilute, to de-emphasize the part of yourself, the black part, that is a problem.

The balancing act also poses dilemmas for gender identification: positioning oneself as indubitably masculine while at the same time sincerely embracing the role of Schoolboy is fraught with the potential for doubts about the authentic performance of both race and gender. As Harper points out, the performance of Blackness is marked by the “very uncertainty, tentativeness and burden of proof seen to character-

ize conventional masculinity.”¹⁷ A too careful observance of school rules, an adherence to Standard English, for example, undermines the representation of black boy-ness. Yet, as soon as African American boys begin to enact masculinity in referential acts of the Good Bad Boy, they risk demotion to the category of Troublemaker.

Fordham and Ogbu’s study of older students corroborates this dilemma. They found that to “act white” had very different consequences for boys than for girls. Males who were seen to “act white” were also deemed less masculine. The researchers claimed that for a boy to be labeled a “brainiac” was to simultaneously call into question his manhood; while to be taking college preparatory courses was tantamount to being gay.¹⁸ African American boys who were “doing well” had to deal not only with the possibility of exile from the racial community, but with being “unmanned.”

This finding that being a Schoolboy exerts increasing pressure on individuals to “prove” their masculinity was confirmed in a series of interviews I conducted with African American men who were college students. Some of these men described strategies they had devised for managing to be seen as committed students by the school and “real” boys by their peers. The ability to fight or to be exceptionally gifted in some field of sports were the most prominent skills mentioned. Boys who had gained a reputation for being able to physically defend themselves were admired for their prowess; their ability in the classroom then became something admirable, an indicator that they could compete in many arenas. But the reputation for fighting had to be acquired outside of school, since fights in school would jeopardize one’s standing with the teachers and undermine one’s apparent academic commitment. Another strategy was to be extremely quick verbally so they could play “the dozens” with the best. This game of verbal aggression and competition only signifies male prowess when played in the vernacular. Therefore, the reputation for being a rap artist must be acquired out of earshot of most teachers. Certainly, the kind of classroom performances described earlier would undo positive reputations with the teachers. Many Schoolboys disidentify with school and join the ranks of the Troublemakers by the time they get into high school because of this tug of war. Troublemakers are not born, they are made.

17. Harper, *Are We Not Men?* 40.

18. *Ibid.*, 194.

Race Matters: Acting Black

The Troublemakers have resolved the dilemma of subjectivity differently. They emphasize race rather than exorcise it as the school demands; turning it up, rather than down. They make race difference visible in school as an assertion of the “we,” of a group rather than an individual condition. Troublemakers are less likely to hide their use of Black English and are likely to use it in moments of discipline. These are situations where they are being “shamed,” and saving face demands a response that speaks of masculinity in a grammar of power. Unity is also affirmed through physical displays such as clothing style, through the formation of a group presence, as well as through open challenges and tests of the race-blindness of the institution.

From a marginalized space in school, Troublemakers constitute alternative notions of self around a group identity, specifically around a notion of Blackness. This unity is galvanized through observation and experience, through current events and their racial frame, through the decoding of race representations, through the active performance of “Blackness” and the consequences of self-fashioning through this identity.

Troublemakers are more likely to wear symbolic badges of their identification; to dress the part. These badges are not just the predictable items of youth “style” such as baseball caps turned back or with sales tags still attached; baggy pants sagging down low on the hips; sports shoes; Chicago Bulls jackets. While this style has its roots in a black popular culture and is seen by school as representing a subversive presence that they work to rule out of school, it is one that has been adopted by youth across a wide spectrum of race and class and is now mass-marketed globally. So to identify one’s “Blackness,” one’s difference as a group from other youth symbolically through clothing and style requires a special touch. Horace wears a T-shirt with a picture of Malcolm X and the quote “By any means necessary” to the jazz band recital when all the other kids are wearing white shirts and black pants. Claude wears a black hooded sweatshirt with the hood up in a gangster style that references black rappers who are folk heroes.

A common experience and common identities in school encourages the crystallization of friendship groups among the Troublemakers, who hang out together on the playground and network during the day. The school has its own perspective on these groups and their power to

pose alternative agendas and activities. This perspective draws on cultural images of gender and race in assessing their challenge to school order. A group of African American girls walking around the Rosa Parks schoolyard at recess is not viewed as a threat, a mass that needs to be dispersed into separate parts or channeled into organized sports. In fact, a group of girls talking or just hanging out together is a typical scene in the yard. Boys who are engaged in hanging out, who are not involved in a game, are likely to be watched closely and with some suspicion by adults. Most of these are small groupings of three or four boys, but some become especially visible to the school as they grow in size. The school personnel also pay close attention to which of the children are in the group.

One group of boys at Rosa Parks makes its racial presence highly visible. It is made up of the most marginalized kids in the school. The adults on the schoolyard at recess pay special attention to this crew of between five and seven African American boys who hang out together generally and are not involved in the football or baseball games. They band together at the edges of the games under the watchful eye of the playground aides and vice principal, who actively attempt to keep other children from joining them. They loiter, they linger, they observe, they are deep in a circle of conversation or they are frozen in silent and ominous deliberation. All the adults are aware of their presence as they congregate, disperse on an adult's command, only to reconvene in some other spot not too far away. Unlike some of the other kids who get in trouble for defying the orders of the adults who police the playground, this group of friends seemingly avoids unnecessary contact with the adults. Their surveillance is so vigilant, however, that they are often implicated in trouble.

The name they have chosen to call themselves is a statement of their identification. They have appropriated NFL, the initials of the National Football League, as their group's tag changing its meaning to "Niggers for Life." They make themselves visible as a crew by tagging their logos onto stop signs, bus benches, even the poster with the code of school rules in the Punishing Room. It is an identity that they are not afraid to flaunt at the school, and the adults know who they are and what NFL signifies. It is their bond, their statement, their pledge to each other and to themselves. It is a statement of collective racial identity as it simultaneously expresses their defiance and distance from school.

You have to notice Claude, the boy who is always at the center of the group. Though he is short for his age, skinny—a real runt—he has a presence that draws my attention. It says look at me. He had been described as a “a little Napoleon” by one of the student specialists. No matter how hot the day, Claude wears his black Raiders jacket and baseball cap. His cap today says “Pooh Man” on it, which I am quite sure is not a reference to Winnie-the-Pooh. Later when I ask him, I find that Pooh Man is an Oakland, California, rapper in the gangster style. He tells me that one of Pooh Man’s best-known songs is from the movie *Juice* and is called “Sex, Money, and Murder.” Under his jacket, Claude wears a thin, worn-out, dingy T-shirt. All of his friends wear baseball caps. Two of them wear black hooded sweatshirts and big wide-legged pants.

The style tells who they are to the world of the school and the streets. They have power, they are a presence: watch out for us, we’re bad, we’re cool. They drift from one edge of the playground to another. They do not participate in the organized games at the end of the yard. Because of this, I assumed that they, unlike the other boys I had interviewed, were not practicing to be baseball or football stars. However, I discovered when I attended the tryouts for the citywide football program that Claude and some of his friends were in the competition for the city league.

These boys were not participating in school games partly because school adults hemmed them in, isolated them, and in fact, stigmatized their inclusion in approved social activities. One boy heading over to their group on the playground was warned away by the student specialist: “You’d better not go over there. You know that you’ll get in trouble if you do.” This caution emphasized that by virtue of being with those kids you became more visible, more likely to be singled out for punishment.

Claude has a bulging file in the cabinet where all the punishment records are kept. I asked the vice principal why he had not been put in the PALS program because he seemed to me to be a prime candidate, given the general profile of the students the program was said to serve. Claude is one of those boys who is deemed “unsalvageable.” “It’s a waste of time and energy to do anything with him,” was the vice principal’s diagnosis. “There are a lot of kids who can use some help, but the good kids always get neglected and the kids who will never make the grade get the attention.” Here is precisely the way that the concept of the endangered species is brought into the school and used as a resource for determining the allocation of scarce and precious funding.

The baddest kids in school are the most visibly black-identified as they construct subjectivity around cultural representations of an “authentic” Blackness derived from cultural icons of the gangster as a renegade, transgressive masculinity. By encoding the NFL logo with the name Niggers for Life they are attaching themselves to potent symbols of race/gender power as well as identifying with a specific class. The initials NFL as the acronym for the football league conjures up images of male power at its extreme: ruthlessly competitive and physically awesome men of enormous bulk and unbelievable salaries.

This is a masculine power that is animated through the figure of the Nigger, undoubtedly the name that most epitomizes the stigmatization and denigration of Blackness in the racial hierarchy of the United States. At the same time, *Nigga* has been reappropriated by black males as a term for recognizing and hailing each other; as a gesture of camaraderie and a shorthand acknowledgment of a shared knowledge and history. The group at Rosa Parks claims this membership and connection as they distance themselves from a worldview that requires disassociation from the community of origin. There is a class identity as well as a racial community being claimed. The designation *Nigga*, as naming of self, makes the link between race and class. Social historian Robin Kelley suggests the term is rooted in “the hood,” the urban, inner-city black community characterized by staggering levels of unemployment and poverty. He contends that the term is employed to differentiate

urban black working-class males from the black bourgeoisie and African Americans in positions of institutional authority. Their point is simple: the experiences of young black men in the inner city are not universal to all black people, and, in fact, they recognize that some African Americans play in a role in perpetuating their oppression.¹⁹

The NFL youth distance themselves from the class mobility strategy preferred by the school and identify with the poor, black, rebellious “hood,” whose very presence the school deplors.

19. Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 210. For a discussion of the use and meaning of the term *nigger* in black communities see pages 209–14.

Special Treatment: Reverse Discourse

Another mode of making race visible in school is through direct confrontation; by speaking out and charging racial discrimination. The Troublemakers have developed theories about the external circumstances they encounter. This formulation is based on the observations of kids, in general, that overwhelmingly the children who are marginalized within the school are black.

My teacher this year . . . she be racist. When she tells us to put something away—mostly all the black kids—she says I’m taking it. When it’s like the white kid—she say, one more time play with that and I’m taking it away. And then she gives them another chance. Everybody, everybody knows that it’s so! My friend, Lucas, he’s white and he says it’s not fair. It’s definitely not fair. But he’s not racism [*sic*] at all. He’s okay. He’s nice. He’s funny. He plays around in class sometimes.

This comment reveals one of the features of the Troublemakers’ well-elaborated theory about how race operates in the school to differentiate among children. In their analysis, racism involves a complex set of social relations that have to do with differential power and its enforcement rather than being about a simple congruence between skin color and racial politics. Trey points out that his white friend has observed that the teacher treats African American students more punitively and takes an antiracist position. Many black youth identified African American teachers as racist. One boy, describing his classroom teacher, said, “She don’t like the black kids. She be racist. And she be black.” It is important to note that both African American and white teachers identified by kids as racist were characterized similarly by some of their African American colleagues in the school, though far more guardedly and in the safe-coded language of the day, as in, “She has a hard time dealing with black boys.”

The ideology that the educational system is race-blind is also contested by adults in the school. African American staff members and a few white adults speak bitterly and with frustration—but cautiously and privately—about the way that race makes a difference in the treatment of children. In public discussions, however, they rarely mention race because they know that raising the issue is volatile, divisive, and

will result in their own marginalization. They fear becoming labeled “troublemakers” themselves.

Not only did the boys observe and create theories about teachers, but they tested their observations and challenged the assumption of race-blindness in spontaneous demonstrations. It is instructive to recount one of these challenges from the three different standpoints that were told to me. The teacher involved, a white woman, told me about the “couch incident” in this way:

Y’know, I don’t let the children sit on the couch during silent reading because they just congregate and start talking. Mark [a white boy] finished all his work and he went to sit on the couch. Then I caught Trey sitting there reading and told him he had to get back to his seat. Of course he had to talk back, saying I pick on certain kids and let others get away with murder. He kept up the arguing, so I sent him to the office. Then Trey’s father calls up after school and yells at me on the phone that I’m a racist! That I’m always picking on the black kids. Of course when he comes in with the mother, he was pretty quiet. She just reeked of alcohol—made me sick to my stomach. So today Horace goes and sits on the couch during silent reading. Testing me! When I called him on it, he said, then how come you let Mark do it. I just told him, Horace, you know better than this. Better go back to your seat or you’re not going on the field trip.

The teacher referred to this incident more than once in conversations with me. She was genuinely upset that her action was considered racist since she prided herself on being highly conscious of race as discrimination and worked at being color-blind in her relationships. I also heard more about the incident from one of the African American student specialists:

Horace and Trey, that’s a bad combination! That kid [Trey] has a jail-cell with his name on it. He says Mrs. Deane picks on black kids. He was mouthing off the other day and wants to make it a race thing. That is so passé. He brought his parents in. His father is a pathetic, weedy guy. Hardly bigger than Trey. The father yells at Mrs. D. on the phone and then comes into the office and was really meek. [The specialist snorts contemptuously. He is very

worked up about this.] Right there, in front of everybody, Trey asks why the “Friday News” [weekly newsletter sent home to all the parents] is just full of *good* things and doesn’t report on any of the *bad* things in the school. I told him that wasn’t the purpose of the “Friday News.”

Both school adults, one African American, one white, refuse the racial interpretation of the incident and invalidate the perspective of the boy and his family. They affirm the official position that it is not the boy’s race that determines the punishment that is meted out, but the boy’s character, his inherent criminality. This rejection of the plausibility of the accusation is bolstered by representation of the mother as “drunk” and therefore not to be taken seriously. The delegitimation of the father is specifically gendered; he is “unmanned” as small and weak. The power of the parents to advocate on behalf of their kid is dismissed.

Trey tells me the story at a much later date. He recalls it in a rather offhand, no-big-deal way. For him, these skirmishes are part of the everyday experience of school. He witnesses the lack of legitimacy and power that his parents bring to his defense against school adults. Trey knows that just as his own tests and charges against the school are discounted and marginalized, so are those of his mother and father. He cannot factor in adult power to bolster his claims within the school against adult authority.

The official discourse of school insists that the “difference” among schoolchildren emerges out of standardized tests and psychological examinations; that in a hierarchy of worthiness “difference” is about individuals, not about a social collective; that being identified as African American within the racialized accounting system of the school district is of no further account. The couch story brings into the open “race” as a feature of social relations in the school; as a basis for differentiation. Trey positions himself as black and, as such, racially marked for special (mis)treatment. The teacher is adamant about discrediting this interpretation of the event because to allow it to be credible is to call into question the neutral, universalistic, impartiality of the rule/authority structure. It is also to call into question her own sincere presentation of self as unbiased.

I have situated getting in trouble in the context of the workday. The Troublemakers constitute alternative modalities of identification for

themselves in the face of the school's classification of them as academic failures, troublemakers, bound for jail. They use the performance of masculinity through dramatic performances and disruptions in class, through making a name through fighting as a strategy for recouping a sense of self as creative, powerful, competent in the face of the tedium of the school's workday. They refuse the school's assessment of them as failing because of their own individual problems and incapacities by affirming a group identity. They assert that they are receiving special treatment because they are black. They invoke racism as a discourse to counter the discourse of individual choice of the school.

For African American males at Rosa Parks, to be normalized within the school's individualizing discourse is to agree to the school's explanatory frame that not only failure in school but one's very life chances, prison or profession, are a matter of personal choice rather than the consequences of structures of inequality and relations of power. Success or failure, it's up to you. You, rather than external forces, are the problem. To embrace the school agenda is to distance oneself from a group identification in the process of fashioning one's individuality. The Troublemakers refuse the school's characterization of the problem as solely about individuals. They reframe the school's criteria for evaluation and assessment of worthiness and competence of students by asserting that race is used as a criteria for teacher judgments and interactions with children. This reverse discourse draws on a popular knowledge sedimented in family and public space to interpret their experience. As the Troublemakers disidentify with school and take up alternative identities they engage in social mobility strategies and paths to adult careers that diverge drastically from the school's and make the formal curriculum seem irrelevant.

The Schoolboys negotiate both race and gender identities among peers, school adults, and family. They are more likely to have internalized the school's position that academic prowess is a matter of individual capacity and choice. They are more likely to constitute themselves through multicultural language and representations. While Schoolboys may employ similar strategies for enlivening the tedium of the workday such as fights and class disruptions, they are more likely to be spectators or to engage in these practices in less public circumstances.

Moments of public punishment are powerful learning experiences about social location and worthiness for everyone involved. These cultural spectacles signal profound meanings of "racial" difference through a performance that engages audience as well as actors in a reenactment

of social roles within relations of power. In these spectacles, the singling out, the naming, the displaying of that which is “bad” affirms the institutional power to stigmatize. D’Andre, like Gary, like Horace becomes a lesson to other children in the room about what it means to be caught in the spotlight of disciplinary power. They learn that to get in trouble with authority is to risk becoming the example, the spectacle for the consumption of others. It is to risk, not mere momentary humiliation, but the separation from one’s peers as different. The racial message that structures the interaction is that Blackness in general is a problem, makes trouble, gets in the way of learning, doesn’t know how to behave properly, must be expelled.