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Review

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Book Review

Jones, Nikki. 2009. *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner-City Violence*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Freeden Oeur

Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street* (1999) remains an influential but controversial work in the fields of urban sociology and African American studies. Anderson argues that a "code of the street," a set of rules for interpersonal behavior, arises as a "cultural adaptation" to urban landscapes crippled by deindustrialization and the concentration of poverty. Lacking trust in the police and the judicial system, many residents abide by a code that calls for taking aggressive, sometimes violent measures to defend personal respect. According to Anderson, the code is fundamentally *male*, making women appear incidental; as he writes, "manhood and respect are two sides of the same coin" (91). The findings in *Code of the Street* lend evidence to the "black boy crisis," which refers to the particularly disadvantaged standing of poor young black men relative to other groups.

In *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner-City Violence*, Nikki Jones both works within Anderson's framework and occasionally steps outside to problematize it. Using insights from feminist theory, Jones shows that poor, young African American women also frequently engage in fighting, and their lives are organized around the same three 'Rs': reputation, respect, and retaliation.

These girls, Jones argues, are typically overlooked in the criminology literature, which tends to focus on gang girls and teenaged mothers, and, thus, how the experiences of young girls are *different* from boys'. (*Code of the Street*, for example, spends an entire chapter ["The Mating Game"] on the subject of men's sexual aggression and what it means for poor young girls to become pregnant.) *Between Good and Ghetto* demonstrates that much of the violence endemic to inner cities does not, in fact, discriminate by gender. To that end, the book forces us to reconsider how knowledge on the inner city is produced, critiquing the assumption, common to much social-science literature, that poor, young black men always suffer the most from inner-city conditions. Jones revises Anderson's claim and posits that the experiences of young black girls and young black boys are *two aspects of the same crisis*. This

challenges gender studies' prevailing zero-sum conception of the "boy crisis," i.e. that if boys are disadvantaged, girls must be relatively advantaged. There are, to be sure, important differences in boys' and girls' experiences, but future knowledge production on the inner city must prioritize the class and race features of the crisis of poor blacks.

Jones spent three years interviewing and observing the lives of young women who had been treated in a hospital-based violence-reduction initiative in Philadelphia. Like Anderson, Jones finds that two dominant and opposing value orientations frame the girls' interactions: being "good" and being "ghetto" (or "decent" and "street," respectively, in Anderson's formulation). In the second chapter, Jones introduces us to Takeya, a "good girl" who manages her "interactions and gender displays in ways that mirror mainstream notions of appropriate femininity and challenge stereotypical notions of Black femininity" (48). Good girls, Jones tell us, can be found in controlled settings like the family and church, generally eschew fighting and aggressive behavior, and are never sexually promiscuous. Being pretty (being light-skinned and having good hair) accentuates the good identity. In the third chapter, we read about DeLisha, who has a reputation as a fighter. Girls usually become fighters one of two ways: by developing a reputation when they're young without adult supervision, or by learning fighting skills from family members, who see the skills as necessary for survival on the streets. Unlike good girls, girl fighters undermine the ideals of respectable Black femininity, which in turn reflect the expectations of White, middle-class femininity.

Jones's first major contribution avoids one of the pitfalls of *Code of the Street*. Scholars (Alonso 2009; Wacquant 2002) have criticized Anderson's book for reifying and dichotomizing the "street" and "decent" value orientations, and then sorting people into one or the other. Jones's book, as the title implies, reveals the fluidity of the "good" and "ghetto" orientations through stories of how the girls are never completely tied to either, and indeed move strategically between them. Jones identifies two strategies these girls use to minimize interpersonal conflict: "situational avoidance," wherein the girls limit their movement in public spaces; and "relational isolation," wherein the girls avoid close relationships. While these strategies may assist them as they aspire to be good, the girls are simultaneously prepared to fight and to defend themselves and their friends. In so doing, they reconfigure understandings of gender normativity by using "physical aggression when appropriate without sacrificing any and all claims to a respectable identity" (155).

Second, Jones does more than just reveal the girls' gender identities *as girls*; she also reveals who the girls are expected to become. By taking seriously the role age categories play in understandings of gender, Jones contributes to those strands of feminist theory inclined to view gender in developmental terms (Gardiner 2002). Understanding what it means to be a good girl requires more than merely comparing

good girls to girl fighters. It also necessitates examining the expectations that girls have for themselves (and those that others, particularly adults, have of them): that they will grow up to be “respectable black ladies” who “distance themselves from behavioral displays...commonly associated with poor or working-class Black women” (8). In a particularly illuminating passage, Jones describes how girl fighters are aware that different gendered expectations will likely require them to temper their inclinations to fight if they move outside the city.

Third, *Between Good and Ghetto* marks a significant advancement in the field of critical youth studies. Jones deliberately resists grounding her analysis in dominant portrayals of inner-city girls as delinquents and sexual deviants, which is common in the criminology literature (what Jones calls departing from a “point of ignorance”). Instead, Jones departs from a “point of understanding” and allows the girls to reflexively articulate the meanings behind their social worlds. She finds that many are not delinquents at all. Doubly overlooked in Anderson’s *Code of the Street* — for being adolescents and for being girls — the African American girls in Jones’s book are purposeful and reflexive agents capable of representing themselves. The book’s appendix provides additional insights into issues of power and representation in the practice of researching young people.

The book’s primary weakness is theoretical. Jones draws liberally from different approaches within the interactionist tradition (Goffman 1959; West and Zimmerman 1987), as well as theories of difference (Collins 1990), but never tells us what unifies them. Early in the book, Jones claims that gender is a process that is never “static,” and that the girls must constantly make it through everyday interactions (Candace West and Don Zimmerman’s [1987] “doing gender” thesis). Later, however, she invokes Erving Goffman’s theory of the “presentation of self” to argue that some girl fighters *are* essentially “ghetto” in the eyes of others. The latter position implies that this “tough front” does *not* require the ongoing maintenance that is central to the interactionist notion of doing gender. Jones never convincingly reconciles these “displays” of gender with gender “interactions,” and, moreover, it’s difficult for readers to keep track of the book’s assortment of concepts (gender “projects” and “identities” also regularly appear). Despite these limitations, *Between Good and Ghetto* is a worthy addition to gender studies, urban sociology, African American studies, and critical youth studies, and its accessibility makes it an excellent choice for undergraduate courses.

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