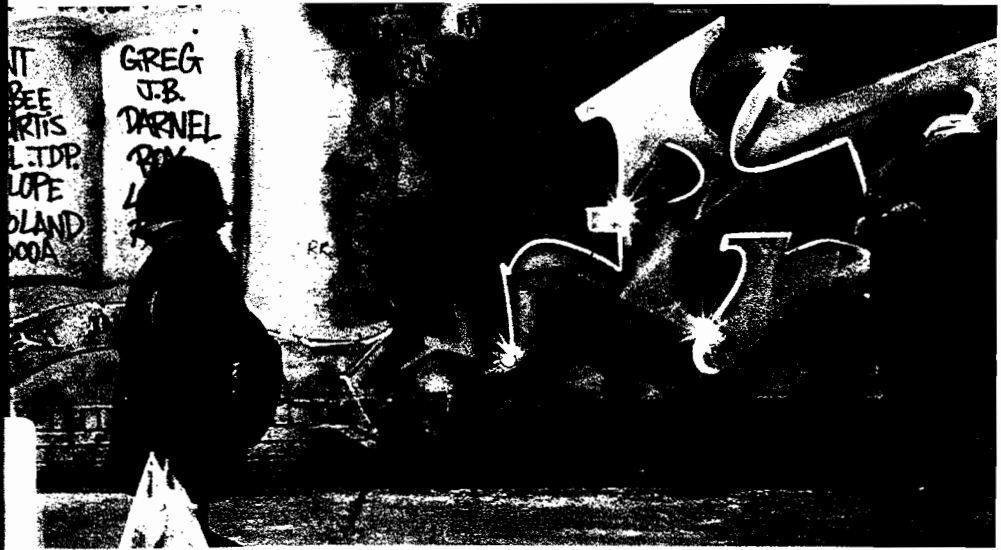


# Code of the Street

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CODE OF THE STREET:  
DECENCY, VIOLENCE, AND  
THE MORAL LIFE OF THE  
INNER CITY

Decency, Violence, and the  
Moral Life of the Inner City



*"Eloquent and moving. . . A  
strikingly powerful work that  
rings with urgency."*

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*There Are No Children Here*

Elijah  
Anderson

TWO

## Campaigning for Respect

whose very appearance—including his or her clothing, demeanor, and way of moving, as well as “the crowd” he or she runs with, or family reputation—deters transgressions feels that he or she possesses, and may be considered by others to possess, a measure of respect. Much of the code has to do with achieving and holding respect. And children learn its rules early.

### THE SOCIAL SHUFFLE

Children from even the most decent homes must come to terms with the various influences of the street. Indeed, as children grow and their parents' control wanes, they go through a social shuffling process that can affirm—or test or undermine—much of the socialization they have received at home. In other words, the street serves as a mediating influence under which children may come to reconsider and rearrange their personal orientations. This is a time of status passage,<sup>1</sup> a formative stage for social identity, as children sort out their ways of being. It is a critical period of flux, and a child can go either way—decent or street. For children from decent homes, the immediate and present reality of the street situation can overcome the compunctions against tough behavior that their parents taught them; as children learn to deal with their social environment, they may thus quickly put aside the lessons of the home. The child is confronted with the local hierarchy based on toughness and the premium placed on being a good fighter. As a means of survival, one often learns the value of having a “name,” a reputation for being willing and able to fight. To build such a reputation is to gain respect among peers. And a physically talented child who starts down this track may find himself increasingly committed to an orientation that can lead to trouble. Of course, a talented child from either a decent or a street-oriented family may discover ways of gaining respect without resorting unduly to aggressive and violent responses—becoming an athlete or, occasionally, a good student. Some parents encourage their children to become involved in dance, camp, Little League, and other activities to support a positive orientation. The important point



IN the inner-city environment respect on the street may be viewed as a form of social capital that is very valuable, especially when various other forms of capital have been denied or are unavailable. Not only is it protective; it often forms the core of the person's self esteem, particularly when alternative avenues of self-expression are closed or sensed to be. As the problems of the inner city have become ever more acute, as the public authorities have seemingly abdicated their responsibilities, many of those residing in such communities feel that they are on their own, that especially in matters of personal defense, they must assume the primary responsibility. The criminal justice system is widely perceived as beset with a double standard: one for blacks and one for whites, resulting in a profound distrust in this institution. In the most socially isolated pockets of the inner city, this situation has given rise to a kind of people's law based on a peculiar form of social exchange that is perhaps best understood as a perversion of the Golden Rule, whose by-product in this case is respect and whose caveat is vengeance, or payback. Given its value and its practical implications, respect is fought for and held and challenged as much as honor was in the age of chivalry. Respect becomes critical for staying out of harm's way. In public the person

here is that the kind of home a child comes from influences but does not always determine the way the child will ultimately turn out. The neighborhood and the surrounding environmental influences, including available social and economic opportunities and how the child adapts to this environment, are key.

Typically, in the inner-city poor neighborhood, by the age of ten, children from decent and street-oriented families alike are mingling on the neighborhood streets and figuring out their identities. Here they try out roles and scripts in a process that challenges their talents and prior socialization and may involve more than a little luck, good or bad. In this volatile environment, they learn to watch their backs and to anticipate and negotiate those situations that might lead to troubles with others. The outcomes of these cumulative interactions with the street ultimately determine every child's life chances.

Herein lies the real meaning of the many fights and altercations that "hide" behind the ostensible, as a rule seemingly petty, precipitating causes, such as the competitions over girlfriends and boy-friends and the "he say, she say" conflicts of personal attribution, including "signifying" and other name-calling games. Adolescents everywhere are insecure and trying to establish their identities. Young people from the middle and upper classes, however, usually have a wider variety of ways to express the fact that they consider themselves worthwhile. The negotiations they engage in may also include aggression, but they tend to be more verbal in a way unlike those of more limited resources. In poor inner-city neighborhoods, verbal prowess is important for establishing identity, but physicality is a fairly common way of asserting oneself.<sup>2</sup> Physical assertiveness is also unambiguous. If you punch someone out, if you succeed in keeping someone from walking down your block, "you did it." It is a fair accomplishment, and the evidence that you prevailed is there for all to see.

During this campaign for respect, through these various conflicts, the connections between actually being respected and the need for being in physical control of at least a portion of one's environment become internalized, and the germ of the code of the street emerges. As children mature and obtain an increasingly more sophisticated understanding of the code, it becomes part of their working concep-

tion of the world, so that by the time they reach adulthood, it has emerged as an important element of public social order. The rules of physical engagement and their personal implications become crystallized. Children learn the conditions under which violence is appropriate, and they also learn how the code defines their relationship to their peers. They thus grow to appreciate the give-and-take of life in public, the process of negotiation, as well as its implications for social identity. And to a degree they learn to resolve disputes mainly through physical contests that settle—at least for the time being—the question of who is the toughest and who will take, or tolerate, what from whom under what circumstances. In effect, they learn the social order of their local peer groups; this order, always open to change, is one of the primary reasons the youths take such a strong interest in the fight.

This reality of inner-city life is absorbed largely on the streets. There children gain, in the words of the street, valued "street knowledge." At an early age, often even before they start school and without much adult supervision, children from street-oriented families gravitate to the streets, where they must be ready to "hang," to socialize competitively with peers. These children have a great deal of latitude and are allowed to rip and run up and down the streets. They often come home from school, put their books down, and go right back out the door. On school nights many eight- and nine-year-olds remain out until nine or ten o'clock (teenagers may come home whenever they want to). On the streets they play in groups that often become the source of their primary social bonds.

In the street, through their play, children pour their individual life experiences into a common knowledge pool, mixing, negotiating, affirming, confirming, and elaborating on what they have observed in the home and matching their skills against those of others. They also learn to fight; in particular, they learn the social meaning of fighting. In these circumstances even small children test one another, pushing and shoving others, and they seem ready to hit other children over matters not to their liking. In turn, they are readily hit by other children, and the child who is toughest prevails. Furthermore, as the violent resolution of disputes—the hitting and cursing—gains social

reinforcement, the child is more completely initiated into a world that provides a strong rationale for physically campaigning for self-respect.

In a critical sense, violent behavior is determined by specific situations, thus giving importance to the various ways individuals define and interpret such situations, which become so many public trials. The individual builds patterns as outcomes are repeated over time. Behaviors, violent or civil, that work for a young person and are reinforced by peers will likely be repeated, particularly as the child begins to build a "name," or a reputation for toughness.

Moreover, younger children refine their understanding of the code by observing the disputes of older children, which are often resolved through cursing and abusive talk, and sometimes through outright aggression or violence. They see that one child succumbs to the greater physical and mental abilities of the other. These younger children are also alert and attentive witnesses to the occasional verbal and physical fights of adults; later, they will compare notes among themselves and share their own interpretations of the event. Almost always the victor is the person who physically won the altercation, and this person often enjoys the esteem and respect of onlookers. These experiences reinforce the lessons many children have learned at home: might makes right; toughness is a virtue, humility is not. The social meaning of fighting becomes clarified as these children come to appreciate the real consequences of winning and losing. And the child's understanding of the code becomes more refined but also an increasingly important part of his or her working conception of the world.

The street-oriented adults with whom children come in contact at home and on the street—including mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, boyfriends, cousins, neighbors, and friends—help shape and reinforce this understanding by verbalizing the messages these children are getting through public experience: "Watch your back." "Protect yourself." "Don't punk out." "Respect yourself." "If someone disses you, you got to straighten them out." Many parents actually impose sanctions if a child is not sufficiently aggressive. For example, if a child loses a fight and comes home upset, the parent might respond, "Don't you come in here crying that somebody beat you up; you

better get back out there and whup his ass. I didn't raise no punks! If you don't whup his ass, I'll whup yo' ass when you come home." Thus the child gains reinforcement for being tough and showing nerve.

While fighting, some children cry, as though they are doing something they are at best ambivalent about. The fight may go against their wishes, yet they may feel constrained to fight or face the consequences—not just from peers but also from caretakers or parents, who may administer another beating if they back down. Some adults recall receiving such lessons from their own parents and justify repeating them to their children as a way to toughen them up. Appearing capable of taking care of oneself as a form of self-defense is a dominant theme among both street-oriented and decent adults who worry about the safety of their children. But taking care of oneself does not always involve physical fighting; at times it can involve getting "out of stuff" by outwitting adversaries, a tactic often encouraged by decent parents of the inner city. Marge, the hardworking decent woman and mother of five children whom we met in the preceding chapter, tells this story:

My son that's bad now—his name is Curtis. And he was going to Linden Junior High School, and he was in the eighth grade. And my son Terry was in the same grade. Terry's a year younger, but Curtis had gotten put back in the second grade. They had never had a fight.

So he [Curtis] called me at work one day and told me that somebody was bothering him, and he was afraid. He was thirteen or fourteen at the time. He said he was also afraid to tell the teacher because if he told the teacher, they were gonna pick on him more. And he didn't have any men in his life at the time—my husband was not his father, so that was another issue. So I said to him, "What are you gonna do? Are you gonna leave school?" He said he was afraid to leave school because if he left school, they would still pick on him. So I said to him, "Curtis, I'll tell you what you do. I'm gonna get off work early. What I want you to do, I want you to talk as bad as you can talk and don't act afraid. They don't know me. None of your friends in

your classroom know me." I said, "I want you to come out and talk as bad as you can talk, but don't hit anybody. And then walk away." I said, "If a fight breaks out, then I'll come and break it up." And that's what he did, and they left him alone. Isn't that something? See, he had to show nerve; it's very important for boys. It's easier for girls. The boys in the neighborhood—if you don't do some of the things they do, or even with the clothes, if you don't have nice things—at that time it was Jordache jeans and Sergio—if you don't have some of those things, people will pick on you and that type of thing.

Many decent parents encourage their children to stand up to those who might be aggressive toward them, but they also encourage their children to avoid trouble. Given their superior resources and their connections to the wider society, including schools, churches, and other institutions, the decent parents have the ability to see themselves beyond the immediate neighborhood; they tend to have more ways "to be somebody" than the typical street-oriented person. The difference in outlook has to do mainly with a difference in social class. Hence they tend to encourage their children to avoid conflict by talking or by turning and walking away. But, as was indicated above, this is not always possible, and as a last resort such children are usually taught to stand their ground.

### SELF-IMAGE BASED ON "JUICE"

By the time they are teenagers, most young people have internalized the code of the street, or at least learned to comport themselves in accordance with its rules. As we saw above, the code revolves around the presentation of self. Its basic requirement is the display of a certain predisposition to violence. A person's public bearing must send the unmistakable, if sometimes subtle, message that one is capable of violence, and possibly mayhem, when the situation requires it, that one can take care of oneself. The nature of this communication is determined largely by the demands of the circumstances but can

involve facial expressions, gait, and direct talk—all geared mainly to deterring aggression. Physical appearance, including clothes, jewelry, and grooming, also plays an important part in how a person is viewed; to be respected, it is vital to have the right look.

Even so, there are no guarantees against challenges, because there are always people around looking for a fight in order to increase their share of respect—or "juice," as it is sometimes called on the street. Moreover, if a person is assaulted, it is essential in the eyes of his "running buddies" as well as his opponent for him to avenge himself. Otherwise he risks being "tried" (challenged) or "rolled on" (physically assaulted) by any number of others. Indeed, if he is not careful, he can lose the respect of his running buddies, thus perhaps encouraging one of them to try him. This is a critical consideration, for without running buddies or "homies" who can be depended on to watch his back in a "jam," the person is vulnerable to being rolled on by still others. Part of what protects a person is both how many people can be counted on to avenge his honor if he is rolled on in a fight and who these defenders are—that is, what their status on the street is. Some of the best-protected people in the environment are members not only of tough street-corner groups but also of families and extended families of cousins, uncles, fathers, and brothers who are known to be down with the street. Their family members, especially when the family's reputation is secure, "can go anywhere, and won't nobody bother them." Generally, to maintain his honor, the young man must show that he himself, as an individual, is not someone to be "messed with" or dissed. To show this, he may "act crazy"—that is, have the reputation for being quick-tempered. In general, though, a person must "keep himself straight" by managing his position of respect among others, including his homies; fundamentally, this task involves managing his self-image, which is shaped by what he thinks others are thinking of him in relation to his peers.<sup>3</sup>

Objects play an important and complicated role in establishing self-image. Jackets, sneakers, gold jewelry, even expensive firearms, reflect not just taste, which tends to be tightly regulated among adolescents of all social classes, but also a willingness to possess things that may require defending. A boy wearing a fashionable, expensive jacket, for example, is vulnerable to attack by another who covers the

jacket and either can't afford to buy one or wants the added satisfaction of depriving someone else of his. However, if a boy forgoes the desirable jacket and wears one that isn't hip, he runs the risk of being teased or even assaulted as an unworthy person. A youth with a decency orientation describes the situation this way:

Here go another thing. If you outside, right, and your mom's on welfare and she on crack, the persons you trying to be with dress [in] like purple sweatpants and white sneaks, but it's all decent, right, and you got on some bummy jeans and a pair of dull sneaks, they won't—some of the people out there selling drugs won't let you hang with them unless you dress like [in] purple sweatpants and decent sneaks every day . . .

They tease 'em. First they'll tease 'em and then they'll try to say they stink, like they smell like pig or something like that, and then they'll be like, "Get out of here. Get out. We don't want you near us. You stink. You dirty." All that stuff. And I don't think that's right. If he's young, it ain't his fault or her fault that she dressin' like that. It's her mother and her dad's fault.

To be allowed to hang with certain prestigious crowds, a boy must wear a different set of expensive clothes every day. Not to do so might make him appear socially deficient. So he may come to covet such items—especially when he spots easy prey wearing them. The youth continues,

You can even get hurt off your own clothes. Like, say I'm walkin' down the street and somebody try to take my hat from me and I won't let 'em take it and they got a gun. You can get killed over one little simple hat. Or if I got a gold ring and a gold necklace on and they see me one dark night on a dark street, and they stick me up and I won't let 'em, and they shoot me. I'm dead and they hid me. I'm dead and won't nobody ever know [who did it].

In acquiring valued things, therefore, an individual shores up his or her identity—but since it is an identity based on having something,

it is highly precarious. This very precariousness gives a heightened sense of urgency to staying even with peers, with whom the person is actually competing. Young men and women who can command respect through their presentation of self—by allowing their possessions and body language to speak for them—may not have to campaign for regard but may, rather, gain it by the force of their manner. Those who are unable to command respect in this way must actively campaign for it.<sup>4</sup>

One way to campaign for status is to take the possessions of others. Seemingly ordinary objects can become trophies with symbolic value that far exceeds their monetary worth. Possessing the trophy can symbolize the ability to violate somebody—to "get in his face," to dis him—and thus to enhance one's own worth by stealing someone else's. The trophy does not have to be something material. It can be another person's sense of honor, snatched away with a derogatory remark. It can be the outcome of a fight. It can be the imposition of a certain standard, such as a girl getting herself recognized as the most beautiful. Material things, however, fit easily into the pattern: sneakers, a pistol, even somebody else's girlfriend can become a trophy. When a person can take something from another and then flaunt it, he gains a certain regard by being the owner, or the controller, of that thing. But this display of ownership can then provoke a challenge from other people. This game of who controls what is thus constantly being played out on inner-city streets, and the trophy—extrinsic or intrinsic, tangible or intangible—identifies the current winner.

In this often violent give-and-take, raising oneself up largely depends on putting someone else down. The level of jealousy and envy underscores the alienation that permeates the inner city. There is a general sense that very little respect is to be had, and therefore everyone competes to get what affirmation he can from what is available. The resulting craving for respect gives people thin skins and short fuses. Shows of deference by others can be highly soothing, contributing to a sense of security, comfort, self-confidence, and self-respect. Unanswered transgressions diminish these feelings and are believed to encourage further transgressions. Constant vigilance is therefore required against even giving the impression that transgressions will be tolerated. Among young people, whose sense of self-

esteem is particularly vulnerable, there is an especially heightened concern about being disrespected. Many inner-city young men in particular crave respect to such a degree that they will risk their lives to attain and maintain it.

As was noted above, the issue of respect is thus closely tied to whether a person has an inclination to be violent, even as a victim. In the wider society, particularly among the middle class, people may not feel required to retaliate physically after an attack, although they are well aware that they have been degraded or taken advantage of. They may feel a great need to defend themselves *during* an attack, or to behave in a way that deters aggression, but they are much more likely than street-oriented people to feel that they can walk away from a possible altercation with their self-esteem intact. Some people may even have the strength of character to flee without thinking that their self-respect will be diminished.

In impoverished inner-city black communities, however, particularly among young males and perhaps increasingly among females, such flight would be extremely difficult. To run away would likely leave one's self-esteem in tatters, while inviting further disrespect. Therefore, people often feel constrained not only to stand up and at least attempt to resist during an assault but also to "pay back"—to seek revenge—after a successful assault on their person. Revenge may include going to get a weapon or even getting relatives and friends involved. Their very identity, their self-respect, and their honor are often intricately tied up with the way they perform on the streets during and after such encounters. And it is this identity, including a credible reputation for payback, or vengeance, that is strongly believed to deter future assaults.

#### THE STAGING AREA

In Philadelphia as in other urban areas, young people especially become associated with the parts of the city, including streets and blocks, from which they come, gaining reputations based on the

"character" of such areas. People are likely to assume that a person who comes from a "bad" area is bad.<sup>5</sup> The reputation of the neighborhood affects the reputation of the school, particularly the high school, that the youth attends. The school's reputation is shaped by its history, including the records of its sports teams, the achievements of its students, the levels of violence and of entrenched and persistent poverty associated with the area, and the number of staging areas in and around it.

Staging areas are hangouts where a wide mix of people gather for various reasons. It is here that campaigns for respect are most often waged. Three types of staging areas can be distinguished. One is quite local, revolving around neighborhood establishments such as carry-outs, liquor stores, and bars. The staging area might be inside, on a street corner outside, or at a house party with little or no adult supervision, where alcohol and drugs are available. The second type is a business strip whose stores cater to street-oriented working-class and poor people. Buzzing with activity, it draws people from a larger area. The third type—multiplex theaters, sporting events, and concerts—brings together large crowds from throughout the city. Such areas are the most volatile, especially at places such as roller-skating rinks or dances where there is music, alcohol, drugs, and rough crowds of young people inclined to "act out" what they have seen or heard others do.

People from other neighborhoods who come to a staging area and present themselves are said to be "representing" both who they are and the "world" or "hood" from which they hail. To represent is to place one's area of the city on the line, to say to outsiders, "Hey, this is what's to me [what I am made of] and my neighborhood," compared with other neighborhoods of the city. For the boldest young people, it is to put oneself on the line, in effect, to put a chip on one's shoulder and dare others to knock it off. It is to wage a campaign for respect, but with the added elements of dare and challenge. There are often enough young people in the staging area to provide the critical mass of negative energy necessary to spark violence, not just against people like themselves but also against others present in the staging area, creating a flashpoint for violence. At sporting events

(where a school's prestige can be on the line) and at other public events like movies at the multiplex, some people are looking for a fight, making the place something of a tinderbox.

In representing, material goods play an important and complicated role in establishing self-image. Youths typically place a high premium on eyewear, leather jackets, expensive sneakers, and other items that take on significance as status symbols. An impoverished inner-city youth who can acquire these material things is able to feel big and impress others, but these others may then attempt to relieve him of his property in order to feel big themselves and impress still others. The wise youths of the neighborhood understand that it is better not to opt for the more expensive items, because they realize that by doing so they make themselves into targets for theft and robbery. But for those who go for bad the staging area is a place to show off, to represent, even to dare someone to mess with you. Just visiting the staging area can be quite satisfying, and risky. The person goes to the "block" or the staging area to see what is the latest trend, what is happening, who is doing what with whom, or who did what to whom, and when.

But the staging area is also a densely populated place where young people hang out and look to meet members of the opposite sex. Here young men and women out to be "with it" or "hip" smoke cigarettes or drink "forties" or other alcoholic beverages, or perhaps they are there to get high on "blunts" (drug-laced cigars). As people represent, their demeanor may serve as a kind of dare. Young men may taunt others by joking with them, saying directly, "Now, start something!" as though they are ready for anything. At an event with large crowds from all around the city, heterogeneous groups vie for social position. People can become touchy, and a fight can start over seemingly minor incidents, but what happens is anything but minor, because an injury or death may result, rearranging the social order of the group and setting the stage for payback-inspired feuds. With so much at stake a man, or a woman, can easily feel disrespected by another who looks at him for "too long" or simply by being cut off in the concession line. Such a "cut," which might also be viewed as an advance at someone's girl- or boyfriend, may be taken as a "statement." Challenging

the statement creates a "beef," and a confrontation can erupt. As the situation deteriorates, it may be very difficult for either party to back down, particularly if members of an audience are present who have, or are understood to have, a significant social investment in who and what each participant pretends to be.

The fight over the beef can begin within the confines of the multiplex or athletic event, first with words that can quickly escalate into shouting, name-calling, or fisticuffs. A peace officer or security guard is usually there, or is sent for, to break up the altercation. Bystanders may also try to break it up, but this is becoming increasingly rare, as people assume that a fight in a public place is likely to erupt into warfare with guns or knives; a stranger trying to intervene may be risking his or her life, and most people will not do so unless they are very sure of themselves or have a stake in the outcome.

If violence occurs, matters are not always settled on the spot. If one person gets the better of the other, there often must be a payback. Everybody knows this, and certain people may wait. Mainly for protection, young people who attend such events may carry "equalizers" or "shit"—firearms or other weapons—but because of security, only the boldest will try to enter the event armed. Most people will leave their shit in the trunk of the car, or hidden in accessible bushes or a trash can, to be retrieved if the need arises. A young man with a publicly known beef will feel there is a chance that he will have to go get his shit. For this to happen, the young man's life does not always have to be in danger; pride, how he feels about his homies, low feelings, or having gotten the bad end of an altercation may be enough for him to prepare to settle things or to try to avenge the offense. So after the security guard or others have stopped the fight, the participants may want to take it outside, where their shit is, and where there is a lot less security. While the staging areas of the city are often the places where beefs spontaneously develop and fights to settle them occur, the code itself germinates, emerges, and grows on the streets, in the alleys, and on the playgrounds of the inner-city neighborhood, where in the interests of social survival small children begin early in life their campaign for respect.<sup>6</sup>



## TYREE'S STORY\*

Tyree is a young black man of fifteen, a high school student, and his story illustrates the intricacy of the rules of the code. Until recently, he lived in a poor section of South Philadelphia with his mother, Rose, a nurse's aide at a local hospital. Then their house burned down, and they lost much of what they owned. Tyree never knew his father, but his mother has had a number of boyfriends who have served as a male presence in his life. These men have come and gone, leaving a bit of themselves here and there. He has known Richard, a man who worked as a security guard; Reece, a parking lot attendant who sold drugs on the side; and Mike, who worked as a janitor at the hospital. Mike continues to come around, and at this point he is Tyree's mom's "main squeeze," the man with whom she keeps company the most. Tyree likes Mike the best. Mike has taken Tyree to Eagles games in the fall and Seventy-sixers games in the winter. Steady and decent, Mike has been most like a real father to Tyree.

After the fire Tyree and Rose moved in with his grandmother, who lives in Southwest Philadelphia, one of the most distressed neighborhoods in the city. Along Fifty-eighth in Southwest, a local staging area, small groups of teenage boys hang out, talking, milling, and passing the time. On the side of a dilapidated building is a graffiti memorial reading, "Barry, we love you, RIP." Particularly at night, prostitutes hustle their wares on the corners. A drug dealer hangs near the pay telephone, standing there as though this is his corner, which for all intents and purposes it is. Public, open-air drug marketing goes on here—in broad daylight or at night. Buyers, some with out-of-town license plates, stop their cars, seeming not to care who might be looking on. Some are white, others are black, but they have one thing in mind—to "cop" their drugs and go on about their business.

Drug dealing is big business here. The trade is carried out in public, but also in the homes of certain proprietors, who charge dealers

\*This account of "Tyree's Story" is based on an extended ethnographic interview. It is dramatized in places to represent vividly the intricacies of the code of the street.

to sell in the house and rent rooms to whores or johns who want to get "tightened up." There are also crack houses, where people simply go to buy or smoke their drugs. The neighbors are aware of this situation, but they are often demoralized, feeling there is little they can do about it. They sometimes call the police, but the police require proof that the place is what the neighbors know it to be. But such proof is not easy for the police to gather. It is sometimes easier, though frustrating, for the residents simply to "see but don't see," trying their best to ignore what is much more than a nuisance.

This is the neighborhood Tyree has moved into, and he has been here only a few days. His major concern at this point in his young life is "to get cool" with the boys who run the neighborhood. He refers to these boys as "bols." He refuses to call them boys. Part of this may have to do with the fact that for so long the term "boy" was so demeaning that young black men replaced the term with one considered to be "cool" from the standpoint of the code. At any rate, Tyree says "bols," spelling it "b-o-l-s" and pronouncing it "buls." A particular meaning of the term is "friend." On the streets of his new neighborhood, Tyree's biggest problem now is to get cool with these bols.

What does that entail? Here, as in almost any working-class to impoverished inner-city neighborhood, the bols are known to run the neighborhood. Tyree understands what the deal is. He used to run with the bols from his old neighborhood, where he himself was in charge, where he had established himself as a main bol of the neighborhood. The task before him now is to get to know the new bols—but also to allow them to get to know him. They must be able to take his "measure" up close, to see what he will or will not stand in his dealings with others, how much nerve and heart he possesses, whether he will defend what he claims is his. Tyree has a general idea of what he has to do here to survive or to have any semblance of a decent existence.

On Saturday, while his mom is at work, Tyree's grandmother quite innocently asks him to run to the store for her.

"Yeah, Grandmom. What you want?"

"I need a loaf of bread and a quart of milk."

Tyree dutifully takes the money and heads out the door. It is two

o'clock on a nice, sunny afternoon. He leaves the house and begins to walk up the street toward the store. He can't help being somewhat tense, given his familiarity with the code of the street. He knows that eventually he will encounter the bols. And sure enough, after about five minutes, he spies about twenty bols walking up the street toward him. He sees them, and they see him. Their eyes meet. It is too late to turn back, for that would mean he would lose face, that he had acted scared, and his sense of manhood will not allow him to do that. He must face this situation.

As he approaches the bols, he feels himself tensing up even more, but he continues. As they come face-to-face, they stop and begin to talk. He knows they want to know what his business is. What is he doing here? Where does he come from? What gang is he from? Even before the questions are fully asked, Tyree tries to respond, "Well, uh, my grandmom, uh . . ." But the bols do not really want an answer. They want to roll on him (beat him up). Before he realizes it, the bols begin to punch him out, allowing most of the group to "get a piece." One boy punches—then another and another.

It is important to understand that these are almost ritual punches, with "good licks" and some kicking, pushing, and slapping "upside the head." Soon Tyree loses his balance and falls to the ground. "[This] really scared me," he said. Falling in such a fight is very risky, for then the worst can happen: someone "could really get messed up." There is an important distinction between rolling on someone and messing someone up. To roll is simply to take advantage of someone, to act as the aggressor in the fight. To mess someone up is actually to hurt him physically to the point where blood is spilled and he might have to go to the hospital. In this instance, the bols are not out to mess Tyree up.

The bols leave Tyree lying on the ground in a feral position. As they move away, they smirk and say things like, "Who do he think he is?" and "We showed the motherfucker, think he gon' come up in here bigger than shit!" Tyree is bruised and hurt, but his pride is hurt much more than his body. For Tyree is a man, and it is extremely important not to let people do this to you. But there was really little that he could do to prevent this. He has been rolled on and utterly dissed. He is very angry, but also sad and dejected. He knows that

they could have seriously hurt him. They wanted to put something on his mind, to show him whose turf this is. And Tyree understands the profound meaning of this incident, for he understands the code and has himself lived by it.

Tyree picks himself up and, without completing his errand, walks back to his grandmom's house with his head down. He is angry, for he has been violated. When he arrives at his grandmom's house, she says, "Where you been? Where are the groceries?" He mumbles a reply and goes to sit on the living room stairs and peer out the window. "What's wrong, boy?" she asks.

"Aw, nothin'," he says.

"Wha—you been fightin'?" she presses.

With this, he mumbles, "I met some bols."

"You hurt? I'll call the police!" she exclaims.

"Naw, don't call the police."

"But you hurt."

"Don't call no police, I'll take care of it myself," he pleads.

This is something of a revelation to his grandmom. She hadn't known that the young men on the streets were this way, because she has never had Tyree with her for so long. She's an elderly woman, and old people are sometimes deferred to and protected by the same bols who violated Tyree. This is part of the code. She had never been aware that Tyree was so vulnerable, so she now worries about what to do.

Tyree goes to the bathroom to clean himself up. He showers and then sits and mopes around the house. He knows his grandmom still needs her groceries, and pretty soon, without saying a word, he leaves for the store. As he travels the distance to the store, he is somewhat edgy, circumspect, trying to watch his back, peeping around the corners and hoping to see any of the bols *before* they see him. He makes it up the two blocks to the store, walks in, and looks around. And over by the ice cream freezer he spies one of the bols who rolled on him earlier. The bol sees him. What does Tyree do now? Full of nerve, he rushes over to the bol and punches him in the face. Tyree gets in a couple of licks before the boy's nose begins to bleed, which was really all Tyree wanted to do; he wanted to pay him back, to let him know he has been punched and violated back. At that point the

bol looks at Tyree and acknowledges aloud, "You got me that time, but I'll be back!"

Tyree looks in the bol's eyes and says, "Yeah, you and yo' mama." And with that he exits the store, without getting what he came for. He walks away. Tyree now feels good, as though he is getting his respect back.

With all the punches and hits, and particularly the public dissing he underwent at the hands of the bols, Tyree suffered a serious loss of respect. To settle scores as he did with the bol at the store is to begin to get his respect back. He retrieves self-esteem at the expense of another. In this case, the bol he publicly punched out. Tyree feels so good, in fact, that he walks (with some care) on to another store—through the turf of the bols—to get his grandmother's groceries. He buys what he wants and heads home carefully, watching out for the bols. Tyree feels under some obligation to punch out every bol he sees until he can avenge himself and regain his respect.

This is the code of the street. The code is not new. It is as old as the world, going back to Roman times or the world of the shogun warriors or the early American Old South.<sup>7</sup> And it can be observed in working-class Scotch-Irish or Italian or Hispanic communities. But profound economic dislocation and the simultaneous emergence of an underground economy that thrives on the "law of the jungle" implicit in the code have exacerbated conditions in many communities. Equally important, the proliferation and availability of guns have further exacerbated such conditions. Tyree could easily acquire a gun. Most of the young boys he knows from his old neighborhood know where they can get a gun without too much trouble.

Tyree arrives home with the groceries, and his grandmother is pleased. Although relieved that Tyree hasn't gotten into more trouble, she now has a new worry—how Tyree will get along with the young men of her neighborhood. She asks him more about his altercation, and he tries to assure her that he can take care of himself. But when he leaves the house, his grandmother worries, and this worry is shared by his mother. Increasingly, given the local news reports of street crime, shootings, and drugs, Tyree's mother questions her decision to move in with her own mother, although she really had little choice; the alternative would have been homelessness. Now

Tyree spends much of his energy trying to persuade his mother and grandmother not to worry about him as he ventures outside in the streets. And while he tries to reassure them, he is really not very sure himself. For he knows that when he leaves the house he must watch his back.

The young men are very aware of Tyree's presence in the neighborhood; they are much more sensitive to the presence of interlopers than are the adults. (This fact is relevant to an understanding of Tyree's mother's and grandmother's ignorance of or indifference to the implications of their move into the new neighborhood.) When leaving home, Tyree steps from his house into the street and then looks up and down, trying to spot a bol before the bol spots him. His orientation is one of studied defensiveness. He wants to avoid contact with those who might be inclined to roll on him. He peeks around corners, travels through alleys, and basically does what he feels he must do—lie low.

There is pressure on Tyree to get cool with these bols, if only in the interest of safety. A few weeks later, on a Saturday afternoon, he is again walking down a street in his new neighborhood, heading to Center City to meet some friends from his old neighborhood. As he approaches the bus stop, he sees a group of bols coming up the street. They are about a block and a half away, and Tyree thus has a choice of running or staying. But something inside him—his concern about being manly, his quest to be defined as a person with nerve, heart, or simply street knowledge—makes him hesitate. They see him, and now it is too late. They know that he sees them. Now he can't run or dodge them; he must meet this situation head-on. Tyree must do what a man has to do. He knows he must deal with them, because the situation has been building for a while. He tenses up, for he feels caught in the wrong place, but he is unable to flee. He knows that if he runs today, he'll always be running. His manhood is on the line. Therefore he goes and meets the bols. But it is almost as though both parties have been expecting this day. He knew it was coming eventually. They knew it was coming, and all the while they have been keeping tabs on him, maybe even keeping score on him, particularly noting the way he rolled on the bol in the convenience store (whose name he later found out was T'iny). This is a showdown.

As they come face-to-face, Tyree says, "What's up!"

They return his greeting, "Hey!" The situation is tense. Tyree says, "Look, y'all. I can't fight no twenty bols." There is a short silence. Then he says, "Can we be bols? Can I be bols with y'all?"

Summoned by Calvin, who seems to be the leader, the group huddles. A few talk to one another, while the others remain quiet. Calvin soon emerges and says, "You gotta fight J C." J C steps forward. He is about six one, eighteen years old, and weighs about 180 pounds. Though Tyree is daunted by the prospect of fighting J C, he tries not to display any signs of fear. He has been expecting to have to fight someone, and he has been dreading this for four weeks; he just didn't know how this would work out—when it would be, whom he would fight, or whether he could trust that others would not jump in. The showdown, therefore, is something of a relief. So he doesn't hesitate. He simply and quickly agrees, saying, "All right," trying to disabuse others of the notion that he is scared.

Calvin says, "Let's go behind this building." So the group of young men go behind a building on Walton Street for what promises to be a fair fight. Tyree is only five seven and weighs about 140 pounds, but he is muscular and quick, and he knows how to hold his hands in a pose to block any shots. J C does the same, and they begin to spar, dancing around, swinging now and then. Their eyes are riveted, following each other's every move. They watch each other's hands, looking for weaknesses and trying not to show any of their own. Much is at stake here. They spar and keep their eyes on each other but also on the audience that eggs them on. J C, of course, is the favorite, but Tyree seems not to care.

They begin to fight. Tyree lands the first punch to J C's midsection, breaking the tension. J C feints and swings at Tyree with a right cross. Finally J C grabs Tyree and begins to pummel him. But Tyree hangs in there, swinging, punching, scratching, even biting. This is supposed to be a "fair fight," but the distinction soon gets blurred. J C is clearly getting the best of Tyree, and Tyree becomes increasingly angry, while feelings of humiliation loom. Yet, in addition to the nerve he showed in taking J C on, he shows just as much heart by hanging in there with the larger boy, for J C is not only larger but also quick with his hands and quite agile. What Tyree lacks in

strength and ability, he makes up for in guts. And this is on display for everyone to observe.

After about twenty minutes, the fight ends, and apparently J C has won. "The bol was just too big and too fast, but I showed them that I had heart," says Tyree. He might have added that J C also had much at stake in this fight; he had a lot to lose if he had gotten whipped, particularly in front of his bols. It is also clear that J C knows he has been in a fight. He has lost a shoe, and his eye is badly bruised. Tyree's shirt collar is almost completely torn off, his arms and neck now bear deep scratches and scrapes, and his nose is bleeding. He put up a very good fight, which was impressive to all. He lost, but he lost to a worthy opponent.

Tyree has now won the respect of the bols, and he is thus allowed to be—in a limited way—a member of the group. The fight with J C has been a step in a long process that will allow him to get cool with the bols and to establish himself in the neighborhood. In the next few days and weeks, people will talk about the fight and how Tyree, though he did not win, gave a good account of himself. And since J C had such a strong reputation or "name" in the neighborhood, Tyree benefits from the encounter. So Tyree gets known around the hood. The bols will now greet him on the streets and not bother him, at least on certain conditions. Tyree may be carrying a box of chicken, and if a bol says, "Hey, Tyree, what's up. Gimme some of that," Tyree is obligated to share it. This is true not just for food but for virtually anything Tyree displays as his own. If he is wearing a nice jacket or a nice pair of sneakers, he must be ready to "loan" them. If he has money, he is expected to be generous with the others. And as he does so, he negotiates his place in the group. This is the code.

As he meets the demands of his new role, he gets cool with the others, establishing, maintaining, and controlling his share of respect. As the young men learn to relate to others, they learn, in effect, their place. But in an environment of such deprivation, respect is in short supply and cannot be taken for granted; trials and contests continue, day in, day out. Status in the group is continually being adjusted, and this dynamic allows bols who are cool with one another to live in relative peace.

## I GOT YO' BACK

In the process of working his way up in the group, Tyree makes friends with Malik. Malik is Tyree's age, fifteen, and is physically about the same size; they are pretty evenly matched. Both young men are marginal to the group, not yet completely established as members. Both have fought other boys but have never fought each other. This observation is significant because fighting is such an important part of residing in the neighborhood, of being a part of the neighborhood groups that dominate the public spaces. Physical prowess and ultimately respect itself are in large part the coin of the social order. Certain boys appoint themselves as defenders and protectors of their turf—of their neighborhood—against bolts from other neighborhoods, in so doing, they claim the area as their domain, making it known that anyone and anything going down in the neighborhood is their business, particularly in matters involving young women.

Malik and Tyree hang together. They traverse the city together, occasionally going downtown to the Gallery, to Thirtieth Street Station, or to one of the staging areas dominated by other bols; in these other areas of the city, people might jump them without a moment's hesitation, mainly because if someone is not in his own neighborhood, there may be a virtual price on his head. This means that anyone out to make a name for himself might jump outsiders for the honor of it, or simply on "GP"—general principle. So in order to travel in peace, or to believe they are traveling in peace, Malik and Tyree often dress to look mean or cool, as though they are "not for foolishness"—not to be messed with. They try to be ready, working to impress others with the notion that they are deadly serious, "that we don't play." When they travel out of the hood, they charge each other with watching their backs, and by taking on these critical responsibilities, they bond and become "tight," at times "going for brothers," or "cousins."<sup>8</sup>

These fictive kinship relationships involve a close connection between the two boys, so close that they are ready and willing not only to watch each other's back but to take up for the other in time of need. But this is not always an easy relationship.

For instance, one day Malik and Tyree are walking down a street

in the neighborhood and encounter a group of young women. In his characteristic way, Tyree begins to "rap" or "hit on" one of the young women, trying out his conversational game. As so often happens when young women are present, the boys can become downright silly, acting out in ways that at times surprise both themselves and their companions. The girls giggle and laugh at Tyree, and Malik, too, laughs at his "silly" conversation in front of the young women. Tyree's "jaws get tight"—that is, he becomes perturbed by Malik's show of disrespect.

As they leave the girls and walk about a block down the street, Tyree stops and confronts Malik. "Say, man. Why you always squarin' me off. You always dissin' me. I'm tired of yo' shit, man."

"Aw, man. I didn't do nothin'," responds Malik.

"Yes you did. You always gettin' on my case, and I'm tired of yo' shit. Put up yo' hands, man. Put up yo' hands," challenges Tyree.

"Aw, man. I don't wanta fight you, man," responds Malik.

"Naw, man. I ain't bullshittin'. Put up yo' hands," presses Tyree.

"Well, I ain't gon' fight you here, let's go behind this building," offers Malik, finally accepting Tyree's challenge.

The two young men walk behind the building they are standing next to and begin to square off. Almost on cue, the two friends put up their hands in the fighting position in an attempt to settle their differences in the man-to-man manner they know. With no audience present, they commence battle, sparring and dancing about.

Tyree and Malik have agreed to a contest that is somewhere between a fair fight and a real fight. Such fights are part of a long and honorable tradition of settling disputes between men, and this tradition has a justice that is its own result, effectively settling things for the time being. The fights are characterized by elaborate rules, including "no hitting in the face," "you got to use just your hands," and "no double-teaming." No one can tell beforehand, however, whether a fight will remain "fair" or change in the course of battle. A change can result simply from audience reaction, which serves to interpret each blow and indicate who is winning or who is beating whom. Audience reaction can sometimes tilt the scale from fair to unfair, and it can determine who wins and loses and thus who must then get even. For instance, a loud slap to the face, even if accidental

and quickly followed by apologies, can alter the character of the contest. Young boys can start off joking and wind up fighting to the death, all because of a reaction to a miscalculation that pushed the contest hopelessly off-balance.

Malik and Tyree dance and spar, huffing and puffing, dodging and feinting. To the onlooker, it appears to be a game, for real blows seem hardly to be exchanged. But suddenly Malik lands a blow to Tyree's shoulder and another to his stomach, and he follows this up with this taunt: "I gotcha." Dropping his guard, Tyree acknowledges this, but then he quickly resumes his fighting stance, again putting up his hands. They go at it again, punching, dancing, dodging. Tyree lands a good punch to Malik's stomach and then, with a right cross, catches him on the chest, but Malik counters with a kidney punch and a knee to the crotch. Tyree checks his opponent with, "Watch that shit, man." They continue trading punches, hits, and feints: They are getting tired. Tyree, hands up, accidentally lets an open hand to Malik's face with the sound of a slap. Tyree knows instinctively what he has done, that he has seriously violated the rules of the fair fight, and just as quickly he says, "Aw, 'cuse me, man." The apology must come quickly and must be sincere, otherwise such a blow can escalate the fight to the point of a serious exchange. Malik responds, "Watch yourself, man. Watch yourself."

They continue their dancing and sparring for about twenty minutes and then stop. They have fought and, for the moment, settled their differences. But, actually, something much more profound has occurred as well. To be sure, the two boys can now smile at each other again, knowing that if they have a disagreement, they can settle it man to man. Through this little fight, they have bonded socially. They have tested each other's mettle, discerned important limits, and gained an abiding sense of what each one will "take" from the other. With this in mind they adjust their behavior in each other's presence, giving the other his "props," or respect. In this context they learn to accept each other, or pay the consequences; in effect, they learn the rules of their relationship. After consummating their bond through a fight, they can now walk together again, while expecting that if someone was to try to jump Malik, Tyree would likely be there to

defend his friend, or vice versa. They informally agree to watch each other's back. When this very strong—and necessary in the inner city—expectation is met, powerful bonds of trust are formed and, with repeated supportive exchanges, ever more firmly established. Essentially, this is what it means to "get cool" with someone, and when the story gets out, each is now more cool with the wider group of bols as well.

## MANHOOD AND NERVE

On the neighborhood streets, many of the concerns of Tyree, Malik, and other young males relating to respect and identity have come to be expressed in the concept of "manhood." Manhood on the streets means assuming the prerogatives of men with respect to strangers, other men, and women—being distinguished as a man. It implies physicality and a certain ruthlessness. Inner-city men associate manhood with this concept in large part because of its practical application: if others have little regard for a person's manhood, his very life and the lives of his loved ones could be in jeopardy. But there is a chicken-and-egg aspect to this situation: one's physical safety is more likely to be jeopardized in public *because* manhood is associated with respect. In other words, an existential link has been created between the idea of manhood and one's self-esteem, so that it has become hard to say which is primary. For many inner-city youths, manhood and respect are two sides of the same coin, physical and psychological well-being are inseparable, and both require a sense of control, of being in charge.

For many young men, the operating assumption is that a man, especially a "real" man, knows what other men know—the code of the street. And if one is not a real man, one is diminished as a person. Moreover, the code is seen as possessing a certain justice, since everyone supposedly has the opportunity to learn it, and thus can be held responsible for being familiar with it. If the victim of a mugging, for example, does not know the code and thus responds "wrong," the

perpetrator may feel justified in killing him and may not experience or show remorse. He may think, "Too bad, but it's his fault. He should have known better."

A person venturing outside must adopt the code—a kind of shield—to prevent others from messing with him. In crime-ridden parts of the inner city, it is easy for people to think they are being tried or tested by others even when this is not the case. For something extremely valuable on the street—respect—is at stake in every interaction, and people are thus encouraged to rise to the occasion, particularly with strangers. For people unfamiliar with the code—generally people who live outside the inner city—this concern with respect in the most ordinary interactions can be frightening and incomprehensible. But for those who are invested in the code, the clear object of their demeanor is to discourage strangers from even thinking about testing their manhood, and the sense of power that comes with the ability to deter others can be alluring even to those who know the code without being heavily invested in it—the decent inner-city youths. Thus a boy who has been leading a basically decent life can, under trying circumstances, suddenly resort to deadly force.

Central to the issue of manhood is the widespread belief that one of the most effective ways of gaining respect is to manifest nerve. A man shows nerve by taking another person's possessions, messing with someone's woman, throwing the first punch, "getting in someone's face," or pulling a trigger. Its proper display helps check others who would violate one's person, and it also helps build a reputation that works to prevent future challenges. But since such a show of nerve is a forceful expression of disrespect toward the person on the receiving end, the victim may be greatly offended and seek to retaliate with equal or greater force. The background knowledge that a display of nerve can easily provoke a life-threatening response is part of the concept.

True nerve expresses a lack of fear of death. Many feel that it is acceptable to risk dying over issues of respect. In fact, among the hard-core street-oriented, the clear risk of violent death may be preferable to being disrespected. Conveying the attitude of being able to take somebody else's life if the situation demands it gives one a real sense of power on the streets. Many youths, both decent and street-

oriented, try to create this impression, both for its practical defense value and for the positive way it makes them feel about themselves. The difference between them is that the decent youth often can code-switch: in other settings—with teachers, say, or at his part-time job—he may be polite and deferential. The seriously street-oriented youth has made the concept of manhood part of his very identity and has difficulty manipulating it.

### THE SCHOOL AS A STAGING AREA

The inner-city school is an outpost of the traditions of the wider society. Racially segregated and situated in an impoverished inner-city community in which violence, drugs, and crime are rampant, it is characterized by the street/decent dynamic.<sup>9</sup> During their early years, most of the children accept the legitimacy of the school, and then eagerly approach the task of learning. As time passes, however, in their relentless campaign for the respect that will be meaningful in their public environment, youth increasingly embrace the street code. By the fourth grade, enough children have opted for the code of the street that it begins to compete effectively with the culture of the school, and the code begins to dominate their public culture—in school as well as out—becoming a way of life for many and eventually conflating with the culture of the school itself. Such a school becomes a primary staging area for the campaign for respect.

In this social setting, decent kids learn to code switch, while street kids become more singularly committed to the street. Such a division, as previously stated, is largely a function of persistent poverty and local neighborhood effects, which include social isolation and alienation, but it is also strongly related to family background, available peers, and role models. For many alienated young black people, attending school and doing well becomes negatively associated with acting white. In what is essentially a racially black street-world, as shown in Tyree's case, one develops a strong need to show others he can handle himself socially and physically on the ghetto streets, a powerful community value in and of itself. This "street knowledge"

is esteemed, and the quest for it and the consideration for those who have it begin to predominate, ultimately competing with, if not undermining, the mission of the school.

With each passing year the school loses ground as more and more students adopt a street orientation, if only for self-defense in the neighborhood. But often what is out on the streets is brought into the classrooms. The most troublesome students are then encouraged by peers to act out, to get over on the teacher, to test authority by probing for weaknesses. Particularly during mild weather, many students in the upper grades attend school sporadically or stop coming altogether, because street activities effectively complete for their time. Even while in school, they walk the halls instead of attending class, and their encounters there often mirror those on the street, marked by tension and fights.

Some of the seriously street-oriented kids may have mental health issues; some have been abused by their parents; others are depressed. The most troubled may fight with teachers, bring guns and knives to school, and threaten people. The idea of deprivation and anger is important here. In this highly competitive setting, the most deprived youths, who can easily be made to feel bad, sometimes become jealous of peers. To avoid feeling bad, these kids may lift themselves up by putting others down. A common tactic is to "bust on" or "signify" at someone, verbally teasing the person, at times to the point of tears. Sometimes the prettiest girls can get beaten up out of jealousy. From so much envy and jealousy, beefs easily erupt, beginning with ritual "bumping" and ending in serious physical confrontations to settle things. Bumping rights are then negotiated, determining who is allowed to bump whom, to pick on whom, and in what circumstances. In essence, these young people are campaigning for place, esteem, and ultimately respect.

In this situation, the school becomes transformed in the most profound sense into a staging area for the streets, a place where people come to present themselves, to represent where they come from, and to stay even with or to dominate their peers. Violence is always a possibility, for the typically troubled school is surrounded by persistent poverty, where scarcity of valued things is the rule, thus lending a competitive edge to the social environment. However, the

trophies to be won are not of an academic kind, rather they are those of the street, particularly respect. In this campaign, young people must be prepared not only to fight, but also to take great care with their appearance. The right look means *not* wearing old or "bummy" clothes, or sneakers that are worn or dirty or out of style. Esteem is so precarious that it can be taken away with just a word, and kids are constantly challenged to defend what they have. Social life becomes a zero-sum scenario: "If you have something and exhibit it, it means I'm less. Who do you think you are by doing that?" The decent kids mimic the street ones, behaving in street ways that often confuse teachers (and also prospective employers and police who might be incapable of distinguishing the decent from the street). Some teachers are unable to differentiate between the two groups. Overwhelmed by clothes, the look, or the swagger, they cannot discern the shy kid underneath, which may be why teachers classify the majority of young people as "street."

To be sure, much of the students' behavior may be purely defensive, which requires significant expenditures of social energy. This situation tends to victimize the weakest players and certainly disrupts the business of the school. In time, when unattended, the street element (and those who would be "street") dominates the school and its local terrain. In the most troubled schools, the street element becomes so powerful that beefs and scores can only be settled by death. Again, most of the young people in these settings are inclined toward decency, but when the street elements rule, they are encouraged to campaign for respect by adopting a street attitude, look, and presentation of self. In this context, the decent kids often must struggle to maintain their credibility, like the fifteen-year-old boy I observed who typically changed his "square" clothes for a black leather jacket (thereby adopting a street look) after he got around the corner from his home and out of his mother's view. In order to preserve his own self-respect and the respect of his peers, he would also hide his books under his jacket while walking to school, bidding to appear street.

In school as in the neighborhood, adolescents are concerned with developing a sense of who they are, what they are, and what they will be. They try on many different personas and roles, and they experi-



ment with many scripts. Some work, others don't. How do the roles of decent and street play in their search for an identity, and what parts do others play? What stages do the young people go through? What is the "career" of identity as this career takes shape?

Observing the interactions of adolescents in school and talking with them reveal how important school authority is to young people, but too often the authority figures are viewed as alien and unresponsive. The teachers and administrators are concerned that their own authority be taken seriously, and claims to authority are always up for grabs—if not subject to out-and-out challenge.

Young people, of course, do not go about developing their identities based solely on privileges and rewards granted by teachers, but this dynamic does exist to some degree. Often students perceive (more or less accurately) that the institution and its staff are utterly unresponsive to their street presentations. Mixed with their inability to distinguish the decent child from the street child, the teachers' efforts to combat the street may cause them to lump the good students with the bad, generally viewing all who display street emblems as adversaries. Here, their concerns might be as much with teaching as with controlling their charges.

In response, the decent children place ever greater stock in their ability to code-switch, adopting one set of behaviors for inside the building and one for outside. But, as indicated above—particularly in the heat of the campaign for respect—the two roles often merge, and what is considered proper in either setting can become one and the same. When this confusion goes unchecked, discipline in the school situation becomes elusive, particularly for those children who seem "to get away with it."

When students become convinced that they cannot receive their props from teachers and staff, they turn elsewhere, typically to the street, encouraging others to follow their lead, particularly when the unobtainable appears to be granted only on the basis of acting white. The sour grapes attitude notwithstanding, a powerful incentive for young people then emerges, especially for those sitting on the cultural fence, to invest themselves in the so-called oppositional culture, which may be confused with their "black identity." Such a resolution

allows these alienated students to campaign for respect on their own terms, in a world they control.

Impacted by profound social isolation, the children face the basic problem of alienation. Many students become smug in their lack of appreciation of what the business of the school is and how it is connected with the world outside. In addition, they seldom encounter successful black people who have gone through school and gone on to do well.

Education is thus undermined because the mission of the school cannot equal the mission of the kids. To accept the school would be to give in and act white, to give up the value of the street for some other thing. And the value of that other thing has not been sufficiently explained to the children to make them want to give up the ways of the street and take on the ideology of the school. So the outpost of mainstream society tries to deliver its message to kids in an environment that has little regard for that society. In fact, the code of the street, and by extension the oppositional culture, competes very effectively with traditional values. As the young people come to see the school and its agents as unresponsive to them, embracing the oppositional culture becomes more important as a way to salvage self-esteem. The mission of the school is called into question, if not undermined.

Alienated black students take on the oppositional role so effectively that they often become models for other disaffected students. They do it because they are profoundly at odds with the white culture and can see themselves as visibly different. But other alienated students may mimic them because they are such strong models.

The culture of the street doesn't allow backing down. When the boys at the Youth Study Center (Philadelphia's juvenile detention facility) saw a video on conflict resolution as an alternative to fighting, they just shook their heads. They knew that you never back down. That is to set yourself up as a doormat. You have to be tough. If you show fear, others will exploit it. So you always have to give the impression that you are strong, that you are a "thorough dude." Even a teacher who shows fear becomes vulnerable and can be emotionally undone by the kids. When that happens, the kids know they've won.

So there is an adversarial relationship between the teachers and the students. The teachers' role is to keep the kids in line. The students' role is either to behave or to try to get over on the teacher.

The school is a microcosm of the community in a sense. Although police and disciplinarians are on patrol, kids are parading up and down the halls, socializing, even buying and selling drugs. The same things are going on inside the school as outside it. Yet it remains a haven, a place where one can go and expect relative order.

### THE DILEMMA OF THE DECENT KID

At a certain critical point in development, sometime around ages five through eight, the child of a decent inner-city family ventures into the street, away from home, out of the view and immediate control of his family. Here children begin to develop an identity beyond the family, one that is helped along by the way they go about meeting the exigencies of the streets. They find their level, get cool with others, and adjust to the situation as they swim about the environment "looking for themselves" and trying to "be real." Essentially, such youth face the dilemma of how to obtain their props—and keep them—on the streets while building a reputation for decency as well.

They often experience a certain tension between what they learn at home and what they find in the streets. The family often becomes mildly concerned about the kinds of children their child is playing with. At this stage the child's peer group becomes extremely important. Often the child must go with what groups are available, and a child from a decent home can easily be sucked up by the streets. The child may learn to code-switch, presenting himself one way at home and another with peers.

Many children are left on their own for long periods of time. Others in the neighborhood, including "big brothers," "cousins," and neighborhood friends of the family, may be encouraged to look out for them. But at the same time the children want to try new things, to find themselves, and to grow into independence. The child

encounters the street in the form of peers, cousins, and older children—and begins to absorb the experience.

To many residents the negative aspects of the street are exemplified by groups of young men like those who harassed Tyree. These young men often come from homes ravaged by unemployment and family disorganization. On the streets they develop contacts and "family" ties with other youths like themselves, as did Tyree and Malik. The groups they form are extremely attractive to other youths, and not simply to those whose lives have been seriously compromised by poverty. These groups dominate the public spaces, and every young person must deal with them. Even the decent young people must make their peace with them.

The connection these decent young people have with the street is not simply a matter of coercion. Often they strongly aspire to feelings of self-worth. And to achieve their goal, they must do more than make peace with the street group; they must actually come to terms with the street. Like Tyree, they must get cool with the people who dominate the public spaces. They must let others know how tough they are, how hard they are to roll on, how much mess they will take. The others want to know what will make such a person's jaws tight, what will get him mad. To find out, they may challenge the person to a fight or test his limits with insults to his family. Some of the most decent youths reach their limits rather quickly, thus allowing others to see what's to him, or what he's made of. Often a fight ensues: as the young men say, "It's showtime."

So the streets, or at least the public spaces, are extremely important to young people, because these are places where they are involved in the process of forging their own local identities—identities that carry over into other critical areas of their lives, including school, church, employment, and future family life. This is an issue for all the children in the environment, decent and street. Even the most decent child in the neighborhood must at some point display a degree of commitment to the street.

Life under the code might be considered a kind of game played by rules that are partly specified but partly emergent. The young person is encouraged to be familiar with the rules of the game and even to

use them as a metaphor for life—or else feel left out, become marginalized, and, ultimately, risk being rolled on. So the young person is inclined to enact his own particular role, to show his familiarity with the game, and more specifically his street knowledge, so as to gain points with others.

It is essential that the child learn to play well. This ability is strongly related to who his mentors and homies are and how much interest and support they show for the child. How “good” he is corresponds to a large degree to how “bad” his neighborhood is viewed to be. The tougher the neighborhood, the more prestige he has in the minds of outsiders he encounters. This prestige also presents a challenge to newcomers, as was the case with Tyree.

Young people who project decency are generally not given much respect on the streets. Decency or a “nice” attitude is often taken as a sign of weakness, at times inviting others to “roll on” or “try” the person. To be nice is to risk being taken for a sissy, someone who can’t fight, a weakling, someone to be rolled on. And to roll on someone once is not always enough for those in search of respect. It is often done repeatedly to establish a pattern of dominance in a group. Young people who are out to make a name for themselves actively look for others to roll on. Once achieved, a name must be sustained and sometimes defended; its owner must then live up to his reputation, or be challenged. A strong reputation wards off danger from others. In this context the decent kids with low self-esteem, little social support, and a perceived unwillingness to be violent become especially vulnerable to being rolled on, their occasional defeats and resultant deference feeding the reputations of others.

With some number of campaigns to his credit, the winner may feel self-confident enough to challenge someone who has already established himself. Defeating such a person may be the ultimate trophy for a boy seriously campaigning for respect. But he is likely to roll on decent youths first. In self-defense, otherwise decent youths will sometimes mimic those who are more committed to the street. On the streets and in the halls at school, they sometimes adopt the “street look,” wearing the street uniform, but also swaggering, using foul language, and generally trying to “go for bad,” all in the interest of acquiring respect. Presenting this street side of themselves may blur

the line distinguishing decency from the street in the eyes not only of their peers but also of outsiders like prospective employers and teachers, and perhaps in the eyes of the young people themselves—though it is a public confusion they often desire.

For in this environment respect is sometimes especially necessary for getting along, and many of the decent kids will play along, code-switching when the situation demands it. Occasionally, though, a decent kid will sit on the fence, impassively, not knowing which way to turn. As luck may have it, attracted by the right peer, he may become overtly impressed by the “cool” behavior of his more street-oriented peers. As was indicated above, such a youth is apt to be respect-needy, since decent values and behavior are generally not held in high esteem. An especially solicitous member of the street group might bring such a person around to his group. But for the decent acquaintance there may be the attraction of elusive social acceptance, of being able to get cool with people on this side of the playground or classroom. The youth may approach this opportunity with some ambivalence, however; such children have heard the many warnings from parents, teachers, and school authorities about “not getting with the wrong crowd.”

In this environment, depending on the circumstances, the decent kid gets a taste of the street culture, the ways of the street group, and these ways—always at odds with the conventional world—can “get good” to him. Particularly satisfying may be the new shows of deference he experiences, as well as the expectations of respect and friendship. Acceptance by the “in crowd” may be too attractive to let pass. In time the decent group may gradually lose its hold on or attraction for the kid. With the taste of the street and social acceptance may come higher self-esteem.

At the same time a fifteen-year-old boy also faces the issues of coming of age and manhood. Here he is encouraged to try out his newfound size and strength to see what they will win him in the game of social esteem. If he has been beaten up and pushed around once too often by a vulnerable target, he may now stand up, particularly if his adolescent growth spurts have left him bigger than others who have been tormenting him. He now begins to relate to them differently. A youngster who can gain some support for his new way of

relating to the group of tough guys may be inclined to test his new strength on others. With the help of his acquaintances, he is able to see himself in a different light and people are now seeing *him* differently. Respect-needy, and on a campaign, he is inclined to practice his new ways not just on other street kids but also on decent kids he knows well, closely noting the social reaction to his new, if provisional, identity. If he is encouraged, he gains points for going for bad as he tries out and forges this new identity by gaining social support. As he grows confident, he settles old scores and may well challenge others. And, as a person, he changes.

If he once sought to be loved, he now seeks to have others fear him. The street code says it is better to be feared than loved. Here he models himself on the street kids, notes how he can put fear in the hearts of others, and is encouraged by his successes to continue. On the street he goes for bad, challenging others, picking fights, and, in the words of the old heads, "selling wolf tickets."<sup>10</sup> At about this time an old head, a neighborhood mentor, who has been following this youngster's career, may "pull his coat," intervening and warning him about what will happen to him if he does not change his ways. But such intervention is less likely to happen today than in years past, mainly because of the general disengagement of such mentors, largely as a result of the spreading economic dislocation and social distress of many ghetto communities. Allowed to continue, he refines his skills, gaining a taste of respect, and comes to crave more: it gets good to him, and slowly he develops a different attitude about himself. He changes from a person who code-switched to go for bad to one who increasingly doesn't seem to have to put up a front in order to assume a street posture in defense of himself and of what belongs to him.

This "coming of age" process has implications for relations with parents, teachers, coaches, and other meaningful adults in the child's life. If he used to do his homework, he may now be less attentive to it. He may have a problem obeying teachers. His grades perhaps begin to suffer. When his mom asks him to go to the store or to run some other errand, he resists. He develops difficulty in doing as he's told. He increasingly gives authority figures back talk. Slowly, his

stance changes from that of a cooperative child to that of an adversary. Arguments erupt more easily.

The changes are clear to those looking on, those people who once depended on the image they had of him as a nice and decent youngster. But those closest to him, particularly mothers, aunts, uncles, and adult neighbors, who remember his formative years, may resist any other definition of the person they know and love—that is, a young man who to them is the same person. They are often incredulous when they hear of something terrible the boy is accused of doing.

Once such a street-oriented person has established himself or made a name for himself, he has some disincentive for code-switching, for now he has much to lose by letting the wrong people see him do so. He is not inclined to sell out to appease "white people or striving blacks." On the streets he has respect precisely because he has opposed that wider society, and to switch back is to undermine his name or reputation as bad. Here the alienation so many young people feel has taken on a life of its own and become established. Those deeply involved in the code of the street sometimes find themselves proselytizing, urging others to join them. (We seldom hear of decent kids saying to street kids, "Hey, why don't you come join us?") A common entreaty is, "Hey! When you gon' get legal?" (meaning, "When are you gon' come and sell drugs with us?").

In contrast, youngsters with a strong decency orientation attempt to avoid falling victim to alienation while still living in an environment rife with its consequences. Lee Hamilton, an eighteen year old, exemplifies this problem of how to obtain props in a street-oriented environment while maintaining decency.

Raised in an impoverished inner-city community, Lee grew up with two older brothers and a younger sister. His father lived with them for a while, but he drank and was physically abusive to the children. Eventually he moved out of the house, though not out of the neighborhood. As a young teenager, Lee found he could go to his father for money, but they would always get into arguments. For a time he took friends with him to avoid the fights until his father got angry about that too.

Lee's older brother, meanwhile, gravitated toward the street and

ended up in prison for robbery. This hurt their mother, a nurse's aide and a churchgoer, very much, and Lee resolved to go a different way from his brother in order to spare her any more grief. Growing up in the community, he had learned the code but was determined not to get sucked into it, and so he searched out friends who were similarly inclined. He found them on the basketball court. Although only five nine and 150 pounds himself, Lee learned to play well enough to hang out with this group.

In addition to playing basketball, the members of the group are distinguished by the larger plans they have. Some are looking to get a job after graduating from high school. Shawn is very good on the court and hopes to make basketball a serious pursuit. Pete and Lee himself get good grades and are planning to attend community college. Even now, when their game is over, these boys go home rather than hanging around on a street corner. In fact, the whole group stands in contradistinction to the street group.

Nonetheless, Lee wears the same clothes as his street-oriented neighbors. When the police cruise his drug-infested neighborhood and see him in his Timberland boots, his striped shirt, and his hooded sweatshirt, they stop him and ask him where his drugs are, and this makes him bitter. The knowledge that the wider system in the person of cops, teachers, and store managers downtown is instantly ready to lump them with the street element takes a psychological toll on boys like Lee. At the same time, there is so little support for decency on the streets that they have to mimic the street kids in order to get by. Some kids handle this by hiding their books when walking home from school or even by changing their jacket, say, once out of view of their mother. It is vital that the wider system identify these youths and pluck them out of the street environment, for they can easily be lost. Lee is already angry at the police.

One way Lee and his friends pass muster on the street is by wearing clothes approved by the street. Another is to act out in judicious ways, cussing or acting tough in situations in which it is not likely to lead to real trouble. But the pressure to be street is always there. One area in which it is keenly felt is in dealing with girls. Many of the girls in poor communities are looking for a boy with money who will buy them gold jewelry and clothes and have their hair tracked. A nice car

alone can snare many a girl. Lee's good looks compensate somewhat for his lack of money, but some other decent boys find it hard to get a girl interested in them. That in itself can lure a boy into becoming a drug dealer. Lee prefers to seek out more serious girls whose interests are not purely material, but it does help his self-image that he can attract the attention of some of the more street girls without flashing gold.

Crucial to resolving the dilemma of being decent in a street-oriented environment is the ability to code-switch. I might add that the serious street element has no need for a put-on; rather, the street is in the person, consuming his being, so much so that he has a limited behavioral repertoire. A decent youth like Lee tends to have a wide array of styles from which to choose how to act, and certainly with which to gauge and understand the conduct of others. With such street knowledge the young person may avoid being taken advantage of on the streets (not a small accomplishment). To be more appealing to those of the street, however, he must present himself in opposition to adult authority and, to some degree, make his peace with the oppositional culture. And this behavior is reinforced by the street group.

It is important to appreciate here that the code of the street and the street knowledge it implies are essential for survival on the inner-city streets. The code works to organize publicly the community, limiting violence and street crime. It thus serves as a kind of policing mechanism, encouraging people to trust others with a certain respect or to face the consequences.

By a certain age a young person may become proficient on the streets and accumulate a certain amount of capital. This kind and form of capital is not always useful or valued in the wider society, but it is capital nonetheless. It is recognized and valued on the streets, and to lack it is to be vulnerable there.

The issues here—those of credibility and social belonging—raise other issues and questions. Would the decent kid resolve his dilemma differently if more decent kids were present? If there were a critical mass of decent kids, could he get by with his decency—in deed as well as behavior—intact? But in the impoverished pockets of the inner city, the decent-acting kids do not form a critical mass. There may be overwhelming numbers of youths who in some settings—at

home, at work, in church, or in the presence of significant adults about whose opinions they care—display a commitment to decency, but they cannot always do so here. They are encouraged by the dominant youths here to switch codes and play by the rules of the street, or face sanctions at the hands of peers about whose opinions they also care.

And, as has been indicated, there is a practical reason for such a tack. To avoid being bothered, decent and street youths alike must say through behavior, words, and gestures, "If you mess with me, there will be a severe physical penalty—coming from me. And I'm man enough to make you pay." This message must be delivered loudly and clearly if a youth is to be left alone, and simply exhibiting a decent orientation does not do so forcefully enough. During the altercations between Tyree and his newfound friends, much of this was being worked out, and as a result Tyree got cool with the others, and they got cool with him. This outcome is essential for Tyree's well-being—and perhaps even for his physical survival.