

investment, workfare, and “prisonfare” that have spawned the mounting social refuse strewn on the streets of the U.S. metropolis. Indeed, Duneier endorses the *institutionalization of economic dispossession and social marginality as queer antipoverty policy* when he proposes that “we will improve our well-being by making provisions for more persons, not fewer, to engage in informal entrepreneurial activity,” and that city government stay out of the way and accept such activity not only as “inevitable” but as downright “admirable” (SW, p. 315). Admirable indeed, is the ingenuity with which American society—and social science—keeps devising novel ways of making its poor shoulder the weight of their own predicament.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY IN BLACK PHILLY:
ANDERSON ON THE “MORAL LIFE OF THE INNER CITY”

Whereas Duneier cleanses the street vendors of Manhattan’s bohemian district by censoring and deflating those aspects of their activities that would render them less appealing to conventional society, Elijah Anderson does not shy away from unpalatable characters and facts. In *Code of the Street* (hereafter COS), he gives the reader a close-up view of the good, the bad, and the ugly on the rough streets of black Philadelphia with a frankness that places his study squarely in the genre exemplified by William Julius Wilson’s 1987 book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, with its unvarnished account of “social pathologies” in the urban core.²⁴ Anderson’s book is striking for the candor and aplomb with which its author confronts realities that most observers either *cannot* see, because they remain safely remote from the scene, or *do not want* to see because it would ruffle their cherished preconceptions of the poor.

The culmination of years of difficult fieldwork and deep scholarly as well as personal engagement with the topic, COS seeks to explain “why it is that so many inner-city young people are inclined to commit aggression and violence toward one another” (COS, p. 9). The answer resides in the rise and spread of a “code of the street,” that is, an oppositional culture of masculine defiance and interpersonal brutality fueled, on the inside, by the declining availability and authority of wholesome “role models” and, on the outside, by economic dispossession (caused by deindustrialization) and by racial exclusion, variously manifested in white prejudice, discrimination, and segregation. To arrive at this answer, the Pennsylvania sociologist patiently exposes the overlapping cultural di-

²⁴ *Code of the Street* can be read as a cultural elaboration and microlevel specification of the thesis put forth by Wilson (who enthusiastically endorses the book on the flap jacket) that attributes the ills of the contemporary ghetto to the combination of joblessness caused by deindustrialization and social isolation fed by family dissolution and the exodus of middle-class “role models” in the context of continued segregation. The jacket text states that Anderson’s tome “brings new understanding to the lives of the truly disadvantaged.”

visions, social tensions, and internecine struggles that rend the fin-de-siècle ghetto asunder and contribute to its collective quandary from within. But his analysis of these struggles is marred by the reification of cultural orientations into groups, conceptual equivocation about the notion of “code,” and a persistent disconnect between data and theory that make it an unfinished work that ultimately raises more questions than it settles. In particular, Anderson’s argument about the centrality of moral mentors is wedded to a theory of action, “role modeling,” that is conceptually defective and continually contradicted by the evidence in the book. As for the narrative of deindustrialization and racial exclusion, it is artificially overlaid onto field descriptions that nowhere display how such external macrostructural forces come to impact life inside the ghetto.²⁵

Code of the Street reads like two separate books. The first, composed of the first four chapters, on the contest between conventional and street values, on the quest for manly respect in public encounters, on drugs and violence, and on the sexual mores of ghetto youth, revisits, revises, and generally repeats the themes and theses propounded in Anderson’s (1990) previous book, *Streetwise* (the COS chapter “The Mating Game” is even an identical reprinted of the chapter “Sex Codes and Family Life among Northton’s Youth” from the earlier book. The second, also comprising four chapters, brings fresh materials on the two social types that Anderson considers the “moral pillars” of the ghetto, the “decent daddy” and the “inner-city grandmother,” and on the travails of two young men who battle to tear themselves from the clutches of the street, the first unsuccessfully, the second with more sanguine results. Both parts turn on the central opposition between “decency” and “the street,” which Anderson introduces by taking the reader on a ride down Germantown Avenue, a major artery of Philadelphia that runs from the white, affluent district of Chestnut Hill through Mount Airy, a mixed, middle-class area, to Germantown, a dilapidated black neighborhood where the “code of street” overwhelms the “code of civility.” There, amidst a desolate urban landscape, young men “profile” and “represent” in and around “staging areas” that are so many proving grounds for a virulent and aggressive form of masculinity; public decency is openly flouted, crime and drug dealing are endemic, and fracas commonplace; streets, schools, stores, and homes are suffused with sociability but also with danger, dread, and destitution due to the dearth of jobs, the deficiencies of public services, racial stigma, and the profound sense of alienation and despair they feed (COS, pp. 20–30). Yet, far from being homogenous, like the city itself, this segment of the ghetto is differentiated along “two poles of value orientation, two contrasting con-

²⁵ *Code of the Street* also suffers from poor editing. The writing is very redundant, with each chapter summarizing the others and rehearsing again and again the central thesis of the book (nearly identical passages are repeated on the same page or only pages apart; see, e.g., pp. 73 and 78, 126 and 129, 209–10, 212–13, 218, 308, 313, 318, and 320), and the bibliographic references, though short, contain glaring errors (one note lists Darnell Hawkin’s 1986 study *Homicide* as a 1966 book entitled *Homocide*).

ceptual categories” of “street and decent” which “organize the community socially” and determine the tenor of life in the neighborhood by “the way they coexist and interact” (COS, pp. 35, 33).

1

Anderson insists at the outset that these paired terms are “evaluative judgments that confer status on local residents,” “labels” that people use “to characterize themselves and one another.” He wisely warns against reifying them by stressing that “individuals of either orientation may coexist in the same extended family” and that “there is also a great deal of ‘code-switching,’” such that the same person “may at different times exhibit both decent and street orientation, depending on the circumstances” (COS, pp. 35–36). But he immediately casts aside his own warning and proceeds to treat these flexible cultural orientations as fixed repertoires—codes, cultures, or value systems—and even as sets of households arrayed against one another. This classic case of *Zustandreduktion*, the “reduction of process to static conditions,” to use Norbert Elias’s (1978, p. 112) idiom, has three unfortunate consequences.²⁶ First, transmuted folk notions that residents use to make sense of their everyday world into mutually exclusive populations prevents Anderson from analyzing the dynamic contest of categorization out of which the distinction between “street” and “decent” arises and how this contest affects individual conduct and group formation. For it leaves unexamined the social mechanisms and paths whereby different persons drift toward this or that end of the spectrum, and what facilitates or hinders their sliding alongside it.²⁷

Next, by taking his cue from the folk concepts of the residents without

²⁶ This is not a mere terminological problem. Despite his early insistence that “street” and “decent” are labels and not individuals or populations, Anderson handles them as such throughout the book. Thus chap. 1 is entitled “Decent and Street Families” and its main sections—“Decent Families,” “The Single Decent Mother,” and “The Street Family”—present individuals who are embodiments of two tangible social types. In the last chapter alone, Anderson insists that “most of the residents are decent,” yet that “decent people seldom form anything like a critical mass.” He estimates, based on visits in “numerous inner-city high schools,” that “about a fifth of the students [are] invested in the code of the street” and that, by the fourth grade, three-quarters have “bought into the code.” He reports that “employers sometimes discriminate against entire census tracts or zip codes because they cannot or will not distinguish the decent people from these neighborhoods.” And he refers to a decrease in “the ratio of decent to street-oriented people” as one moves deeper toward the heart of the ghetto or what he somewhat cryptically calls “ground zero” (COS, pp. 309, 311, 317, 319, 324).

²⁷ There are places where Anderson hints at this question, as when he notes that “the kind of home a child comes from influences but does not always determine” whether a child goes “decent” or “street,” or when he writes that the inability of street-oriented kids to code switch is “largely a function of persistent poverty and local neighborhood effects, but is also strongly related to family background, available peers, and role models” (COS, p. 93). But this listing of factors stops the inquiry right where it should begin.

anchoring their points of view firmly in the social order, Anderson presumes precisely that which needs to be demonstrated: that these two sets of families are properly differentiated by their moral values rather than by the distinct *structural locations* they occupy in local social space and the objective life chances and liabilities associated with these. Anderson is fully aware that “the inner-city community is actually quite diverse economically,” and he points in passing to variations in assets, occupation, income, and education (COS, p. 53). But he does not construct the system of places that these variations compose, so that practices that may be effects of social-structural position are *by default* automatically attributed to “culture” under the guise of “the code.” Instead, he draws a dichotomous portrait of “decent families” and “street families” that leaves no middle ground, little overlap, and faint symbolic interplay between them. Decent families display all the hallowed virtues of the stereotypical American family of dominant ideology: they are “working hard, saving money for material things, and raising children to try to make something out of themselves” in accordance with “mainstream values” (COS, p. 38). They hold on to their jobs even when these are insecure and underpaid, ally themselves with “outside” institutions such as churches and schools, and keep faith in the future. Their deep religious commitment allows them to maintain “intact nuclear families” in which “the role of the ‘man in the house’” predominates and instills in all a sense of personal responsibility. Street families are their mirror opposite: they “often show a lack of consideration for other people and have a rather superficial sense of family and community”; being deprived of good-paying jobs, their resources are limited and frequently misused, their lives “marked by disorganization” and filled with frustration. They are derelict in their parental duties, inconsiderate toward neighbors and have periodic run-ins with the police; by example, they teach their children “to be loud, boisterous, proudly crude, and uncouth—in short, street” (COS, pp. 45–47). The question looms, *unanswered*: Are these families destitute because they are morally dissolute or the other way around? Is their cultural orientation the spring or the spin-off of their lower position in social space and of the different relation to the future that comes with it?

Note that Anderson’s characterization of the “street family” is wholly negative, defined by deficiency, deficit, and lack; the street family’s orientation and actions are grasped from the standpoint of “decent” families who strive to distance themselves from “uncouth” neighbors. By thus adopting the folk concepts of the residents as his analytic tools, Anderson runs into a third problem: like the “decent folks,” he attributes all the ills of the “community” to the street people, in effect *taking sides* in the battle that these two factions (or class fractions) of the ghetto population wage against one another, instead of analyzing how their opposition operates practically to frame, curtail, or amplify objective differences in social position and strategies in the neighborhood. Anderson’s candor about the unsavory aspects of ghetto life is thus accommodated by comparten-

talizing behaviors and assigning flattering and offensive patterns to two distinct populations defined precisely by their contrasted moralities. Throughout the book, he is openly committed to documenting (and lamenting) the predicament and vindicating the point of view of the “decent” people.²⁸ This personal commitment to “decency”—spotlighted by the term’s presence in the subtitle of the book—limits Anderson’s observations, colors his analyses and truncates his ability to make sense of street values other than as the desecration of decent ones even as they are fostered, as we shall see below, by “adaptation” to material hardship and blocked opportunities.

2

The centerpiece of Anderson’s book is its grounded description of the workings of the “code of the street,” this “set of prescriptions and proscriptions, or informal rules, of behavior organized around a desperate search for respect that governs public relations” in the ghetto (COS, p. 10). For the young men who embrace it, life is a perpetual “campaign for respect” waged by conveying, through appearance, deportment, and demeanor, speech and act, that they are prepared to defy and dish out violence without fear of consequence so as to get their share of “juice,” as manly regard is called on the streets. The diffusion of this bellicose mindset from the street into homes, schools, parks, and commercial establishments such as taverns and movie theaters, infects all face-to-face relations. It feeds predatory crime and the drug trade, exacerbates interpersonal violence, and even warps practices of courtship, mating, and intimacy between the sexes.²⁹ Here Anderson extends and enriches the previous, abbreviated, analysis by Richard Majors and Janet Billson of “the cool pose,” that “ritualized form of masculinity” through which marginalized African-Americans affirm “pride, strength and control” in the public theater of everyday life (Majors and Billson 1992, p. 23). Majors

²⁸ The only negative property that Anderson reports about “decent families” is that their efforts at upward social mobility can be perceived as an expression of “disrespect” for their neighbors and is liable to trigger a “policing effort” designed to keep them from “selling out’ or ‘acting white,’” which means adopting middle-class manners and moving out of the neighborhood. This is in sharp contrast to Anderson’s (1978) earlier work, particularly *A Place on the Corner*, a masterful study of the interactional construction of the ghetto social order, in which the points of view of the “regulars,” the “winos,” and the “hoodlums” are treated on a plane of full epistemic equality.

²⁹ On these topics, COS does not add much to the existing literature because it presents mostly stylized facts based on what Anderson himself calls “impressionistic materials . . . from various social settings around the city” (COS, p. 10) that leave key processes underspecified. One finds thicker descriptions and deeper dissections of the crack trade in Bourgois (1995), of the dynamics and dilemmas of stickup work in Wright and Decker (1997), of the sensual and moral construction of masculine honor through violent confrontation in Katz (1989), and of the plight and hopes of teenage girls in Kaplan (1997).

and Billson saw the “cool pose” as a symptom of oppression manifested in disastrous education, rampant unemployment, high poverty, uncontrolled fertility, and hypermorbidity; they portrayed it as a product of “underlying structural violence that jeopardizes the equal opportunity of blacks” and “breeds violence in its enraged victim.” Anderson likewise presents the “code of the street” as “a complex cultural response to the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, to the stigma of race, to rampant drug use, to alienation and lack of hope” (flapcover text).

But what exactly is a code, where does the “code of the street” come from and how does it actually generate particular behaviors? One would expect that Anderson’s book would elucidate these issues, but the more one reads the more muddled they seem to become. First, the code is variously described as a set of “informal rules,” an “etiquette,” a “value orientation,” an “oppositional culture” and the objective regularities of conduct they prescribe, but also as a “script,” a set of roles and their patterned expectations, a personal identity, a “milieu,” and even as the “fabric of everyday life” in toto.³⁰ This loose and overexpansive definition creates problems, for if the code is both a cultural template that molds behavior and that behavior itself, the argument becomes circular. Next, there is considerable confusion as to the origins and vectors of the “code of the street.” The notion is first introduced as a contemporary, group-specific, normative constellation spawned in the ghetto by the unique confluence of racial domination, economic devastation, and distrust of the criminal justice system. But a few pages later we learn that it is only the latest avatar of an ancient conception of masculine honor that reaches back to the dawn of civilization and is shared by a multiplicity of older and newer immigrant groups in American society.³¹

For clarification, Anderson refers the reader to the “plausible description tracing the tradition and evolution of this code” supplied in two books by journalists: Fox Butterfield’s *All God’s Children* and Nicolas Lemann’s *The Promised Land* (COS, p. 328). This does not clarify much, not only because neither book meets the usual standards of historical scholarship, but also because they flat out gainsay Anderson’s thesis of an aggressive conception of honor spawned by a combination of deep poverty and racial exclusion leading to virulent alienation in the U.S. metropolis after the 1970s. Lemann’s (1986) book claims that the culture of the postindustrial

³⁰ “The code of the street is not the goal or product of any individual’s actions but is the fabric of everyday life, a vivid and pressing milieu within which all local residents must shape their personal routines, income strategies, and orientations to schooling, as well as their mating, parenting, and neighbor relations” (COS, p. 366).

³¹ On the one side, Anderson writes that “the code is a complex cultural response to the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, to the stigma of race, to rampant drug use, to alienation and lack of hope.” On the other, he maintains that “this 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. And it can be observed in working-class Scotch-Irish or Italian or Hispanic communities” (COS, flapcover text, p. 84).

ghetto is an import from the agrarian South brought there by the Great Migration of the interwar decades: for him, the “code of the street” is a Southern complex rooted in sharecropping and thus operative also in rural regions. As for Butterfield (1995, pp. xviii, 11), rampant violence in the inner city “has little to do with race or class, with poverty or education, with television or the fractured family”; it is neither recent nor peculiarly urban since it “grew out of a proud culture” of honor among whites in the antebellum South, which itself had its “roots in the blood feud between clans and families dating to the Middle Ages.” Contradictory recountings of its origins and carrying group means that the “code of the street” can be variously interpreted as a conception of *masculinity* (shared by all classes), as a *lower-class* cultural model (shared by all ethnic groups), as an *ethnic* or regional cultural form (but specific to one gender), or yet as a sociomental construct spawned by a particular *place* of extreme destitution and alienation (the street, the jobless inner city, or the hyperghetto), perhaps with influences from the criminal or convict culture. Some clarification is in order here to better locate the “code of the street” somewhere between a timeless masculine propensity to aggression and the peculiar expression of ethnoracial, regional, or class atavism.

3

Tracing the genesis of the “code of the street” as historically sedimented and class-ethnically inflected masculine ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in urban public space would not only help specify its tenets and chart its transformation, showing how the “cool pose” of the seventies mutated into the “hard case” of the nineties for black men trapped in the nether regions of U.S. social space. It would also clear up another ambiguity in Anderson’s account: the street code is said, at times, to organize and curtail violence by supplying “a kind of policing mechanism, encouraging people to trust others with a certain respect,” while, at other times, it is found responsible for sowing distrust, destabilizing relations and diffusing aggression so that even “decent and law-abiding people become victims of random violence” (COS, pp. 105, 108). This suggests that the “code” cannot explain a particular pattern of conduct *except in conjunction with other social forces* and factors that act as “switchboards,” turning its (dis)organizing power on or off. Among these factors that beg for a more sustained discussion than Anderson offers are the wide availability of handguns and the growing symbiosis between the street and the prison culture due to the astronomical rates of incarceration of young African-Americans from urban centers.³² This, in turn, implies that rising

³² For Fagan and Wilkinson (1998), it is not the informal rules of masculine honor but the implements and purposes of violence that have changed in the ghetto over the past two decades. In the early nineties, the mass circulation of guns and their rampant use by street gangs to conquer and regulate expanding street-level drug markets caused a sudden upsurge and epidemic-like spread of violence (and account also in part for

internecine violence in the ghetto is the unanticipated *product of public policies* of tolerance of private weapons (ownership and commerce) and of penal management of poverty in the metropolis via the “prisonization” of the street habitus, which points less to the local culture of masculinity than to the state (Wacquant 2001).

Specifying how the code of the street produces more or less violent behavior on the ground would likely disclose its dubious conceptual status. As a *depictive* device designed to capture the everyday perspective of ghetto residents, it is useful and illuminating; as an *analytical* tool aimed at explaining social conduct, it suffers from severe shortcomings. Code is a concept that comes from cybernetics and information theory via structural linguistics and anthropology. But, as numerous critiques of structuralism have shown—the most thorough being Bourdieu’s (1977) well-known dissection of Lévi-Strauss in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*—such an approach reduces individuals or groups to the status of passive supports of a “code” that works out its independent semiotic logic “behind their backs”; it cannot grasp practice other than as the mere *execution* of a timeless cultural model that negates the inventive capacities of agents and the open-endedness of situations, thereby freezing dynamic relations into eternal replicas of a single blueprint. In many passages of Anderson’s book, the code does appear as a *deus ex machina* that moves people about in the manner of puppets and dictates behavior irrespective of material and other factors. The “code of the street” is even invoked in instances where it is clearly superfluous: for example, one hardly needs to “acquire the street knowledge of the etiquette” of the stickup to figure that it is better to cooperate with an assailant who sticks a gun to your head and defer to his demands—which Anderson overinterprets as acknowledging “the authority, the worth, the status, even the respectability of the assailant” (COS, p. 128). It is a simple matter of trying to avoid injury or death, which any properly socialized urban denizen understands no matter her “code.”

4

What a wayward youth caught by the street “needs is a serious helping hand: a caring old head can make a real difference” (COS, p. 136). With this pronouncement, Anderson sets the stage for the second part of *Code of the Street*, in which he seeks to demonstrate that wholesome “role models” such as the “decent daddy” and the “inner-city grandmother” have an impact on social life in the ghetto. The trouble here is that, as with Duneier’s depiction of sidewalk vendors, upon close reading his own data continually rebut this thesis. “The decent daddy is a certain kind of

its recent decline). Then “guns became symbols of respect, power, identity and manhood to a generation of youth, in addition to having strategic value for survival” in an environment of dispossession and an “ecology of danger” (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998, p. 105).

man," a "highly principled and moral" man with "certain responsibilities and privileges: to work, to support his family, to rule his household, to protect his daughters, and to raise his son to be like him," as well as "to carry the weight of the race on his shoulder" (COS, p. 180). His authority rests on his embrace of the work ethic, his abiding commitment to propriety and property, support from the church and access to economic resources, chief among them jobs. But "today the decent daddy's role of sponsorship is being challenged by deindustrialization" and his "moral aura" is waning. Having lost his economic footing, his ranks are dwindling, he is becoming less visible, and many young men "play the role poorly" because they know only "the outlines of the model" for lack of having been exposed to it firsthand in its full splendor (COS, p. 185). They are thus liable to become defensive, hypersensitive, and short-tempered, and they sometimes take out their frustration on their women when the latter dare "challenge their image as the man in control" (COS, p. 187).

For proof that the "decent daddy" remains "important for the moral integrity of the community," Anderson adduces a string of loosely assembled observations, anecdotes, and interview excerpts, including 11 pages of a rambling and highly repetitive account, by one such decent daddy, of an incident 25 years ago, in which his beloved, model son was killed in a banal if horrific confrontation with gang members (COS, pp. 194–204). This father is understandably distressed and bitter that life should be so unfair to someone who has steadfastly honored precepts of "decency." But voicing such pain and tracing out the ripples of emotional damage through the family does little to specify the social conditions and mechanisms whereby the morality he aspires to and embodies can or cannot become socially effective. Indeed, this decent daddy and his compatriots emerge as anachronistically yearning for a bygone world of stable factory employment and retrograde gender arrangements in which the man is the provider and the woman keeps to "her place, which is taking care of the house and preparing food to his satisfaction" while being watchful "not to speak out of turn or talk too much and make him look small" (COS, p. 183). Anderson's own nostalgia for this age of Fordist patriarchy blinds him to the fact that, far from being content with domestic subservience, African-American women have long assumed a major role in the affairs of their community and that the waning of the influence of the "decent daddy" is due not simply to the declining economic position of black men and their inability to deliver tangible rewards ("Their moral authority is weakened when being nice doesn't lead to material benefits: a good job for a young man, a good household for a young woman"; COS, pp. 204–5). It results from a sea change in the shape and dynamics of family, gender, and age relations sweeping over a profound and long-standing rift between black men and women that is especially pronounced at the bottom of the class structure but affects all

classes.³³ No amount of bemoaning the rise of the “‘bad heads’ (like certain rap artists),” who now allegedly supplant the decent daddy as beacon of achievement—will restore the conditions that made the latter a salient social type and bring back “the old days [when] the black man was strong” so that “even the white man would take note,” as one of Anderson’s informants puts it (COS, pp. 205, 194).

Much as the role of the decent daddy is fast eroding, “the network of grandmothers continues to form a communal safety net” of sorts but “that net is weakened and imperiled” (COS, p. 207). Because of economic re-trenchment, the spread of drugs, and the attendant crystallization of the oppositional culture of the street, the “black grandmother is once again being called upon to assume her traditional role” as “selfless savior of the community,” valiantly taking care of unwanted children, compensating for “the inability—or unwillingness in many cases—of young men to fulfill their parental obligations and responsibilities,” and wielding moral authority at large (COS, pp. 208, 211). Though there exists, not surprisingly, two types of grandmothers, the respectable and the street-oriented, the traditional grandmother is basically the older female counterpart to the decent daddy: financially secure, God-fearing, ethically conservative, dependable, and insistent on authority and accountability. But if it is true that she has become “a conceptual touchstone [*sic*] of the value system into which many young girls are initiated and actively grow” (COS, p. 214), then why do so many of these same girls behave so recklessly?

Instead of subjecting his informants’ romanticized vision of the past to a methodical critique informed by the social and oral history of the ghetto, Anderson lionizes it, leaving unresolved two contradictions at the heart of his account. First, the two major roles of the decent daddy and the heroic grandmother cannot have blossomed together since their functional importance is inversely related: Who needs the valiant grandmother to take care of the babies of a wayward daughter if the decent father has successfully “modeled” proper morality and raised his children, and especially his sons, the right way? Indeed, neither social type plays a major part in historical depictions of the midcentury ghetto and in contemporary life-story accounts (e.g., Drake and Cayton 1945; Greenberg 1991; Trotter 1995; Gwaltney 1980; Monroe and Goldman 1988; Kotlowitz 1991). Second, the “traditional grandmother” succeeds as *grandmother* only because, *in Anderson’s own terms*, she has failed as *mother*: despite her “enormous moral authority and spiritual strength,” she was unable to rein in her adolescent daughters and prevent their untimely pregnancy. And now she has to pick up the pieces as best as she can in the context of public

³³ For a view contrary to the masculinist folk vision of the “decent daddies,” documenting the less visible but not less decisive role of women as “makers of the race,” see Higginbotham (1992), White (1998) and Clark and Thompson (1998); for a thorough treatment of the deep-seated “crisis in nearly all aspects of gender relations among all classes of Afro-Americans,” see Patterson’s (1998) provocative and disturbing essay, “Broken Bloodlines.”

indifference such that she can rely on no one but herself and her close female kin.

As evidence for the ethical prowess of the inner-city grandmother, Anderson supplies the 15-page-long, underedited transcript from “a tape-recorded conversation” with Betty (COS, pp. 219–33), one such grandmother. To the degree that one can trust an account that is uncorroborated by observational data, this transcript suggests, not that Betty embraced a glorious moral calling on behalf of the “community,” but that she was forced to take over the care of her teenage daughter’s babies owing to the criminal ineptitude of the city’s child, health, and social services. The latter did next to nothing to protect a 12-year-old girl who reportedly was pulling knives on her own mother, ran away repeatedly, was raped on the streets, infected with syphilis and herpes as well as addicted to crack (which the hospital staff where she delivered a two-pound baby failed to detect; COS, pp. 222–23). Brute necessity and the tragic bankruptcy of public institutions rule the day in the ghetto. Betty is understandably exhausted and exasperated: she wishes that her daughter and her babies would “just go and stay away” and that doctors would forcibly sterilize her.

Anderson titles the closing section of the transcript “The Final Reality: Betty Accepts Her Heroic Role,” but there is little heroism in such *kinship servitude* thrust upon (sub)proletarian women by the faltering of the social-welfare wing of the state. The state’s contribution to this calamity is even greater yet, as Betty had to give up her job as a nurse’s aide to be allowed to receive welfare for her daughter’s babies. Anderson unwittingly concedes that material push, and not normative pull, is what trapped her in this predicament: “The lack of affordable day care in conjunction with the rules of welfare eligibility left Betty with only one responsible course of action: to leave her job in the private sector in order, in effect, to become employed by the state to raise her grandchildren” (COS, p. 233). In no other Western society would a grandmother have to pay such a high price for the combined errant conduct of her daughter and the gross dereliction of the state. Indeed, Anderson admits in the closing lines of the chapter that, “although generally loved and respected even when disobeyed,” the grandmothers “are losing clout” and “may come to seem irrelevant” (COS, p. 236), an admission that contradicts the thrust of his analysis hitherto.³⁴ All in all, Anderson presents a moving portrait of the decent daddy and the inner-city grandmother as the backbone of

³⁴ Anderson does not consider the possibility that, just as she can serve as a moral anchor, a grandmother may act as a malevolent force, drawing her children and grandchildren into a web of drug addiction and trafficking, theft, prostitution, and other criminal activities, in response to abject poverty and rampant violence affecting the lineage she heads. Yet that is precisely the case of America’s most famous “inner-city grandmother,” whose “harrowing true story” is recounted by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Leon Dash (1996) in *Rosa Lee* and chronicled in a widely watched PBS documentary.

the urban black community; however, this portrait suggests not that they operate as viable moral anchors and social mentors, but that they are overloaded and out of touch with current gender, family, and state relations.

5

The final two chapters of *Code of the Street* recount the travails of two young men struggling to gain a footing in the legal economy and achieve a measure of material stability and social standing. Here, Anderson offers a rare window onto the perilous obstacle course that African-American men face as they seek to trump their preordained fate at the bottom of the class and caste order. The book finally comes alive with stirring and eventful materials that richly repay a close reading and allow Anderson to display his deft touch for ethnographic probing. We get a close-up view of how John and Robert attempt to juggle the conflicting demands of employers and kin, sort out loyalty to the proximate peer group and commitment to established society, and conciliate the defiant masculine ethos of the street with resignation to the dull life of the low-wage laborer. The problem is, not only is the ratio of analysis to narrative and interview transcripts quite low (some eight pages out of 52 in the first case examined), but the latter hardly support the theory of mentoring and deindustrialization-cum-racism that Anderson intends them to illustrate. “John Turner’s Story” (chap. 7) is emblematic of this stubborn disconnect between data and interpretation.

John Turner is a 21-year-old high school graduate and father of six children by four different women, with extensive ties to gangs and repeated collisions with the law, whom Anderson first encounters in a carry-out restaurant where John toils as a busboy for \$400 a month. The “college professor” helps him gain a respite from the court, then finds him a solid job working as a janitor at a hospital where, despite a rough start and the declared reticence of the union steward, John promptly posts a stellar record. But, a few weeks later, he is thrown back in jail for failing to pay his monthly court fine of \$100, even though his hourly wages have jumped from \$3.50 to \$8.50—John maintains he has other, more pressing, needs to meet, such as saving for his children’s future college education. After he returns to work, the young man confronts the open disdain and ostracism of the older janitors, who feel threatened by his presence and devalued by his demeanor. As a result, John abruptly quits his job and resumes dealing drugs, burning his way through mounds of “easy money” in a spree of personal dissipation, conspicuous consumption, and gifts to kin. A year later, the streets have turned out too wild and treacherous for his own taste, and John wants to “cool out.” So he returns to begging for money, a suit, and a job from Anderson who, after unsuccessfully trying to enroll him in the military (John’s criminal record makes him ineligible) eventually lands the young man yet another entry-level position

in a restaurant kitchen, making him “the happiest man on earth” simply for having a job this time. When John later insists that he needs money to help his children, Anderson gives him \$150 as a means to sever their relationship.³⁵ Later, we learn that John got shot in the gut in a drug deal gone sour in Baltimore and finds himself a cripple for life at age 27.

As in previous chapters, Anderson asserts that “the system of legitimate employment is closed off to young men like John Turner: by prejudice, by lack of preparation, or by the absence of real job opportunities. But they observe others—usually whites—enjoy the fruits of the system, and through this experience they become deeply alienated. They develop contempt for a society they perceive as having contempt for them. The reality of racism looms large in their minds” (COS, p. 286). The trouble is, this explanation does not fit John Turner’s story at all: thanks to Anderson’s personal assist, the employment system was opened to him (as well as by his own mother, who earlier got him a job as a technician in the pharmaceutical company where she works), and he did gain access to a secure, well-paid, position with full benefits. Moreover, there were no whites on the scene to exclude or block him, as it was *black* janitors who “dogged” and harassed him out of the hospital: the shop steward who was supposed to sponsor him nicknamed him “the half-way man,” put his “shit out on the street” (revealing to others John’s paternity and family situation), and routinely “dissed” him by making derogatory remarks about his sexual habits (“Keep that thing in your damn pants!”).³⁶

So neither deindustrialization nor racism provide a straightforward explanation for John Turner’s backslide to the demimonde of the street, that is, for why he could not *hang on* to a firm spot in the legal economy after he had been given a royal chance to ensconce himself in it. This is not to say that labor market restructuring and racial domination are not at play here, for clearly they are: the virulent *class* prejudice *among* African-American workers that detonates John’s relapse into the informal economy is overdetermined by their collective vulnerability in the age of desocialized wage labor and made potent by the embeddedness of black employees in a structure of authority governed and surveilled by whites. But it is equally clear that a number of crucial mediations are missing here if we are to link the macrostructures of class and caste inequality to

³⁵ Anderson is brutally honest about the motives and conditions of their parting: “I had continued to help John even after it had become apparent that he was using me, because I wanted to see how he responded to various situations. At this point, however, I felt I had developed a rather complete picture of him; furthermore, I was beginning to feel uneasy about our association” (COS, p. 285). No such negatively charged intercourse is reported with “decent families.”

³⁶ Likewise, in recounting Robert’s story, Anderson claims that “people associated with the criminal element . . . justify their criminal behavior by reference to racism, which they and their friends face daily” (COS, p. 317). Yet one striking feature of Robert’s trajectory is precisely that he never encounters a single white person; even when he runs into trouble with city officials, it is a black city inspector who gives him grief over his license as a street vendor.

the microsetting in which John Turner's actions acquire their logic and meaning. Nor is the "lack of an effective role model" responsible for John Turner's undoing (COS, p. 237). For surely, if a mentor as powerful as Anderson, with his extensive connections, impeccable cultural credentials, and multifaceted interventions (he gets John a top-flight attorney, contacts his parole officer, intercedes time and again to get him jobs, and supplies a supportive ear, stop-gap money, and sage advice throughout) could not extricate John from his troubles, what chance would a dispossessed and isolated "old head" from the neighborhood stand to have an impact?

The lesson Anderson draws from this biographical case study is that there exists "a basic tension between the street and the decent, more conventional world of legitimate jobs and stable families" and that, at the end of the day, "the draw of the street is too powerful, and [John] was overcome by its force" (COS, p. 285). But this merely *re-describes* the phenomenon at hand, it does nothing to explain it. Anthropomorphizing the street, as folk wisdom does, cannot reveal whence its power comes and how it operates. To unlock that enigma, one must recognize that John's conduct is neither the blind execution of a normative model ("the code") nor the rational pursuit of opportunities effectively offered to him at a given time, but the product of a discordant dialectic between the *social structures* he faces and the *mental structures* through which he perceives and evaluates them, which are themselves issued out of the chaotic world of the street and therefore tend to reproduce its patterns even when faced with a different environment. What ultimately foils John Turner's escape from the subproletariat is not a generic opposition between the "culture of decency" and the "code of the street" but the specific *disjuncture between* the social *position* opened to him and the *dispositions* he imports into it: John's strategies continue to be driven by a street habitus even as his objective possibilities momentarily expand beyond those usually afforded by the ghetto.

Adopting the static theory of "role enactment" and its correlate, Robert Merton's notion of "anomie," not only forces Anderson to regress to an ad hoc psychological explanation, as when he proposes that John Turner could not escape the street because "he never seemed fully committed to improving himself" (COS, p. 274).³⁷ It also prevents him from inquiring into the social constitution and workings of what is a *broken habitus*, made up of contradictory cognitive and conative schemata, disjointedly assembled via durable immersion in an entropic universe of extreme economic marginality and social instability, which continually generates irregular and contradictory lines of action that make its bearer ill-suited

³⁷ This argument also suffers from circularity, as the evidence for John's alleged lack of commitment to "decency" is the very behavior that the lack of decency is supposed to explain. Had John secured a foothold in the legal economy, one could argue *a contrario* that this proves that he is indeed devoted to conventional values. Nothing would be demonstrated in either case.

to the requirements of the formally rational sector of the economy.³⁸ The built-in limitations of role theory block Anderson from capturing the evolving dialectic between social position and disposition that governs the *double-sided production of urban marginality* and explains, in cases of disjuncture such as this one, how the latter may paradoxically be perpetuated by the very people upon whom it is imposed.

6

Because he starts from an overly monolithic vision of the ghetto and conflates folk with analytic concepts, Anderson cannot relate the *moral distinctions* he discovers in it to its internal *social stratification*. He thus boxes himself into a culturalist position with deeply disturbing political implications insofar as they render ghetto residents responsible for their own plight through their deviant values or role ineptness. To preempt this, Anderson must superimpose the trope of deindustrialization and racism onto his “role-model” theory, even though little in his field observations points to these factors. Had he started from a systematic map of social differentiation inside the ghetto, he would have found that what he depicts as the “coexistence” of two “codes” that seem to float up above the social structure is in fact a low-grade cultural war and social antagonism, centered over the appropriation of public space, *between two fractions of the black urban proletariat*, the one situated at the cusp of the formal wage economy and tenuously oriented toward the official structures of white-dominated society (the school, the law, marriage), the other deproletarianized and demoralized to such an extent that it is turning inward to the informal society and economy of the street. The distinction between these two categories is not a hard and fast one but, on the contrary, labile and porous, produced and marked by microdifferences imperceptible to the “distant gaze” of outsiders. But these small positional differences are associated with homological differences in dispositions that tend to reinforce them and, through a cumulative dialectic of social and moral distancing, determine divergent fates among people who seem to have started out from about the same place (especially if they are observed from afar and from above, as in survey research).

Much as a battle rages inside the ghetto between the “street” and “decent” orientations, that is, between two relations to the future anchored in adjacent but distinct social positions and trajectories, an unresolved clash runs through the pages of *Code of the Street* between two Elijah Andersons and two theories of the involution of the ghetto, “role-model

³⁸ For an empirical illustration of how a splintered habitus functions to produce unstable and volatile strategies in the ghetto economy that reinforce the objective irregularity of its collective organization, see Wacquant (1998); for further discussion of this dialectic of objective structure and subjective “agency” among deproletarianized African-American men, see Young (1999); for an interesting contrast with John Turner’s failure, see Fernandez-Kelly’s (1994) account, “Towanda’s Triumph.”

deficit” and “deindustrialization-cum-racism,” which express the different political facets of the work and carry with them divergent policy prescriptions. Anderson-the-conservative, propounding a *normative* theory of social action and a *moral* theory of social order, keeps asserting the importance of (masculine) values and commitment to (patriarchal) decency. Anderson-the-liberal, wedded to a *rational choice* model of conduct and a *materialist* conception of social structure, counters that lack of jobs caused by deindustrialization and persistent racial exclusion doom inner-city residents anyway. Anderson-the-moralist recommends the rebuilding of “the social infrastructure” of the ghetto, which requires that “the old heads of the community [be] empowered and activated,” that is, a conservative return to a past that never was. Anderson-the-materialist calls in mantric fashion for the “opening up [of] the world of work” via “a comprehensive plan that will allow no one to fall through the cracks” (COS, p. 316), that is, a liberal future that will never be.

In the first version, ghetto residents are *agents* of their own moral and cultural dereliction, but only insofar they are utter “cultural dopes” deceived by a “code” gone awry. In the second, they are hapless *victims* of structural changes in the economy and continued domination by whites. The stitching together of these contradictory theses effected by making the “code” an “adaptation” to circumstances and cultural alterity a by-product of structural blockage (a similar resolution of this antinomy is found in Wilson [1996]). But this move guts out the symbolic dimension of social life in the ghetto: it robs culture of any autonomy, it strips agents of all “agency,” and it takes us back to a mechanical model wherein behavior is deduced from a cultural code that is itself directly derived from an objective structure wholly external to the ghetto.³⁹ And this, in turn, negates the important lesson of Anderson’s book: that there exists significant if fine-grained cultural and moral distinctions inside the ghetto, inscribed in both institutions and minds, that help explain the diversity of strategies and trajectories followed by their residents that only long-term ethnography can detect and dissect.

³⁹ Another paradoxical consequence of this mechanical reversion to economic determination-in-the-last-instance is that it leads Anderson to dismiss the very cultural and moral distinctions that he has spent the entire book elaborating when he concludes: “The condition of these communities was produced *not by moral turpitude but by economic forces* that have undermined black, urban, working-class life and a neglect of their consequences on the part of the public. . . The focus should be on the *socio-economic structure*, because it was structural change that caused jobs to decline and joblessness to increase. . . But the focus also belongs on the *public policy* that has radically threatened the well-being of many citizens” (COS, p. 315; emphasis added). Why, then, devote 350 pages to anatomizing the “moral life of the inner city” if it is but an epiphenomenon of industrial restructuring and state neglect? And why does the book not contain a single statistic on the evolving economic and employment makeup of Philadelphia nor a single line on the changing public policies pursued at the municipal, local, and federal levels?