Sample Paper #1, EC 1370 Race and Inequality in the U.S.

In his 1999 book *Code of the Street*, Elijah Anderson's meticulously transcribed anecdotes, often as disheartening as they are revealing, powerfully illustrate the cyclical nature of urban poverty. They prove that improvements to welfare, public schools, the criminal justice system, and even the labor market cannot single-handedly repair the broken social system that gives rise to the "code of the street."

Reading this book took me back to the fall of my junior year, which I spent working at a public charter school in socioeconomically diverse Jackson Heights, Queens. Anderson's portrait of the "acute alienation from mainstream society and its institutions" experienced by the urban poor, especially the young, resonated with my own experiences in the classroom (322). Yet I was disappointed with Anderson's conclusion that, "Only by reestablishing a viable mainstream economy in the inner city, particularly one that provides access to jobs for young inner-city men and women, can we encourage a positive sense of the future" (325). After painstakingly developing a holistic portrait of the urban ghetto, Anderson's solution seems oddly one-dimensional. To posit that the major solution to urban poverty is "the development of jobs that pay a living wage" (324) does not reflect, in my mind, the complex and entangled problems that Anderson detailed in *Code of the Street*. I wish that Anderson had tackled directly the psychological alienation and dearth of self-esteem that pervade every anecdote and argument in his book, and that he had acknowledged the need for more comprehensive, education-based solutions to urban poverty.

Especially after reading John Turner's story, I was surprised to hear Anderson contest that jobs are the number one solution to the harsh realities of the street. As a young father struggling to achieve stability, Turner aptly illustrates the factors that undermine the urban poor, even when there are jobs to be had. Anderson helps Turner obtain a union job as a hospital employee—this occupation pays more than double his prior salary. Yet Turner mismanages his money, lands in legal trouble, and ultimately decides to return to selling drugs when he can no

longer stand friction with his co-workers. Three major issues that Turner confronts can be extrapolated to many other urban poor people. First, lacking a high school education, Turner is unqualified for most well-paying jobs—his criminal history exacerbates this. Second, Turner realizes that he can make significantly more money faster by selling drugs; as Anderson notes, "the draw of the street was too powerful" (286). Third, Turner seems to exhibit an external locus of control; that is, discouraged by his surroundings, educated only to the high school level, and lacking many predecessors in his community to serve as positive examples, Turner's sense of personal responsibility is eroded (288). Once he attains a job, he struggles to maintain it. For John Turner, unemployability, the draw of the streets, and psychological barriers form an insurmountable chasm separating him from a successful, long-term career. In fact, the labor market seems to represent only a minor problem for Turner. Anderson himself admits toward the end of the chapter that "simply providing opportunities is not enough" (289). Somehow, the author seems to forget the morals of Turner's story when crafting his conclusion.

Don't get me wrong—jobs are critical. But demanding more employment opportunities seems like a downstream solution to an upstream problem. As manufacturing jobs disappear, industry shifts, and the U.S. economy demands increased amounts of human capital, expecting companies to pursue low-skill workers in relatively costly domestic markets is unrealistic. Furthermore, as long as the drug world (and, before welfare reform in 1996, the perverse incentives of the welfare system) draws poor people away from regular, law-abiding occupations, increased opportunities for employment will not fully reverberate in urban ghettos. Rather, poor urban people must receive assistance in acquiring the education, psychological well-being, and other resources necessary to obtain and maintain skilled positions. And if Anderson's book teaches us anything, it's that comprehensive and varied interventions must occur at once and cut across all pockets of an urban community. The theme of "too little, too late" clearly arose in Betty's story. When rehab failed to help her daughter curb her crack addiction, Betty found herself unemployed and responsible for three infants. Thanks to prenatal

drug exposure and the poverty-stricken status of their caretaker, Betty's grandchildren began their lives playing catch-up to their peers. Statistically, those children are likely to perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

Volunteering in urban public schools today, I observe in very small children evidence of urban poverty, from self-esteem issues to poor nutrition to lack of preparation for academic work. These surprisingly early symbols convince me that the crux of the solution to urban poverty lies with the youngest generation. During my time in New York I visited the Harlem Children's Zone, now a 100-city-block area in Upper Harlem. The mission of HCZ is to provide a "conveyor belt" of programs to ensure that low-income children receive the same opportunities and resources as their middle-and-high-income counterparts. HCZ's services are predicated on the assumption that, when it comes to a productive future, both cognitive and noncognitive skills like patience and persistence matter; skill gaps exist between the poor and non-poor; cognitive and noncognitive skills are teachable; and "skills a child learns early on make it easier for him to master more complex skills as he grows up" (Tough 191). Geoffrey Canada, the founder of HCZ and himself a native of the South Bronx, believes strongly that educational failure in urban ghettos cannot be separated from other problems plaguing modern youth: violence, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, lack of employment, crime, AIDS (FSKG 69).

Thus, HCZ reaches into every aspect of a child's life, from the school, to the home, to the streets, with the expectation that changing the skill set and outlook of the youngest generation will change the condition of the entire neighborhood. HCZ programs include "Baby College," where thousands of young, poor parents learn about child development and basic parenting techniques; "Harlem Gems" pre-kindergarten, where four-year-olds receive intensive preschool care from 8am to 5pm; tens of afterschool programs providing sports, art, and job-training skills to any interested child or teenager; and an extensive force of social workers and counselors who constantly engage with the local community.

HCZ's results are tremendous. For consecutive years, 100% of third graders in its two charter schools have scored at or above grade level in math and reading, better than nearly every other school on Manhattan. Crime rates in HCZ areas in Upper Harlem have fallen, college-going rates have increased, and the safety and satisfaction of neighborhood residents have skyrocketed. HCZ may not be *the* solution, but Canada's strategy garners tangible results. In fact, HCZ's efforts in Harlem respond to a common theme in the anecdotes of *Code of the Street*. When poor city residents are given confidence in their abilities, their inner "decency," and their future, they are much more likely to succeed in life.

With *Code of the Street*, Anderson presents a profound and jarring ethnographic contribution to our perception of urban poverty. His analysis, though not always politically correct, clearly depicts the chains on urban ghettos through personal anecdotes, complementing Sugrue and Katznelson's emphasis on structural causes of poverty. But like so many authors, when it comes time to recommend strategies to ameliorate urban poverty, Anderson falls short. By focusing on job creation, he fails to do justice to a rich and complex problem. Comprehensive, education-focused interventions as early as possible would better address the cyclical nature of poverty in urban ghettos.

Works Cited

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Sample Paper #2, EC1370 Race and Inequality in the US

Self-Censorship in Public Discourse

"It is a deadly canker in the body politic, and I will have it out!" So said Henry VIII about treason in *A Man for All Seasons* and so say I today about political correctness--for the most part.

Last week, a black friend and I debated the anticipated Democratic primary between Kirsten Gillibrand and Harold Ford Jr. We agreed that both candidates were distasteful in their own ways but disagreed about whom to support: I favored Gillibrand; he, Ford. I asked him how much race was a factor, only to be rebuked for my "racial assumption." Eventually, he explained that race was indeed a factor, but for the sole reason that Ford's reliance on minority votes would oblige him to address substantive social justice concerns. The problem, therefore, had been my "insensitive" and "presumptuous" tone, for which I apologized. Our discussion ultimately strengthened our friendship, since our sincere, if sometimes testy, exchange attested to our mutual trust and respect. A similar event occurred in 5th grade: during a "Hot Topics" class, I suggested that blacks tended to be poorer than whites because of slavery and racism. A black student complained about my insensitivity, even though we agreed about the substance of my remark. In this case, too, a one-on-one talk brought reconciliation, and a bond of friendship deepened. These are tame examples, but they represent an approach that welcomes productive and, often, messy conversation. An alternate approach would have been for me to hold my tongue for fear of criticism. Any differences would have festered. A subtle but powerful barrier would have arisen despite mutual tolerance. Propriety would have prevented discussion of moral issues--a morally impermissible outcome.

Political correctness exerts the same insidious influence on society at-large. It quashes necessary discourse by limiting not only what can be said but, even more fundamentally, what can be asked. Why raise an issue that cannot be discussed freely? Political correctness is symptomatic of a larger failure to consider moral issues with the nuance, depth and frequency they deserve. The question least asked is often the one that matters most: how much money are we willing to spend on healthcare to save X number of lives? How do we weigh Iraqi civilian deaths against those of American soldiers and civilians? Or Palestinian deaths against those of Israelis? How much has black culture been corrupted by the depravity of a selfish, sexist cult of gangster rap music? To what extent are the world views of most white Americans influenced by unconscious—and conscious—racism? I often do not know exactly where I come down on these

types of questions, and they are always complicated and often unpleasant. It is therefore tempting to revert to easy clichés. Political correctness provides an outlet for this easy way out. It allows us to think that we care, when we do not. That we are addressing social problems, when we are not. That we share the fundamental values that must shape policy responses, when we do not. Political correctness permits us to overlook untidy issues in favor of vapid declarations: God Bless America. And our troops. And, least I forget, freedom and democracy. Huh? Me neither.

We can only understand and improve moral and social perspectives if we discuss them as they are, not as empty phrases would make them seem. When we evade the ugly and inherently complex problems of our society, we only ensure their continuance. Sunlight is the best disinfectant. Political correctness adds inertia to existing circumstance by creating a false veneer of admirable consensus, which allows us to bask in status quo morals, no matter their actual merits. Even when politically correct modes of discourse criticize prevailing problems—such as racial inequality—they ignore the proactive forces that continue to breed them. We overcome negative aspects of our inherent nature and learned mindsets not by distancing ourselves from them in speech but by grappling with them in thought and action.

Political correctness does not deserve unqualified condemnation, for it often emerges from noble concerns and reflects genuine sensitivities. Feminists demand gender-neutral vocabulary where traditional terms entrench paternalism. Advocates of racial equality condemn certain slurs, as do defenders of gay rights. Such concerns are laudable, for the language a society employs speaks to its values. The norm that Jenninger transgressed represents another appropriate form of political correctness (though an apology should have been sufficient to restore his reputation). Certain issues merit greater sensitivity given the histories involved. Thus, if I intended to play a tape containing high-octane hate speech—for the purpose of condemning it—I should warn audience members beforehand, especially if many of their ancestors had suffered such hate. The most important issues can often be the most painful, and we should not deny that aspect of our humanity--least of all in pursuit of the moral truths that create our humanity. Accordingly, variations in IQ across race and gender—whether they result from culture, oppression, nature, or bad tests—should be discussed with due care. The history of oppression based on gender and race makes this so. In rare cases, topics should be avoided entirely because their discussion can only hurt and never help. To use a crude, but true, example, my friend's father once said that his mentally-handicapped granddaughter was dumber than a

dog. When confronted with this statement, he defended his remark on the grounds that it was true. Maybe yes, maybe no, but it should not have been said.

Do our lines become arbitrary? Of course. Should we consistently reevaluate the ways they control our discourse? It is essential that we do so. And we should never let the procedure of political correctness replace substantive judgment. However, narrowly-tailored boundaries that reflect our values add to our common humanity. They do not obscure truth but rather lead us to the higher truths of love and brotherhood.

The problem with political correctness in practice is that it often masks truth. Thus commentators—from Fox News to CNN—can, with a straight face, liken Harry Reid's comments to those of Trent Lott, even though they indicate opposing sentiments regarding race relations.[1] The same intellectual shallowness allowed Clarence Thomas to label his treatment a "high-tech lynching," when, to put it bluntly, his supporters tended to be more racist than his opponents. Political correctness causes people to indulge, publicly and privately, in an alternate reality devoid of meaning. As a result, I disagree with the notion that those most concerned with communal norms are least likely to violate the dictates of political correctness. For those who genuinely care about social issues are most likely to shun token rhetoric and voice views that might offend the sensibilities of those who mistake gas for meaning. When the majority of a community or society buys into political correctness in an artificial way, "offensive" remarks often come from those whose beliefs actually coincide with the original intent of politically correct words. Such "true believers" despise forms of political correctness that suggest no one is racist, no one is homophobic, no one is sexist, no one cares less for Iraqi lives than Israeli ones, and so on, when, in reality, the opposite is true. Professions of tolerance become cheap and lose their profundity when we allow lip service to pass for sincerity.[2]

There is, as the essay suggests, at least one powerful exception in the case of these "true believers." It occurs when a group, such as African Americans, chooses to have one discussion with "insiders" and another with society as whole. In this sense, political correctness is a tragedy of the commons: for who, in the forum, would be so foolish as to seek truth at the risk of harming their cause when others consistently use lies to further their opposing arguments? If I were Jesse Jackson I would not want to shift attention away from justified grievances by legitimizing the assertions of those who would wrongly blame blacks entirely for their problems. In this sense, true believers face a moral dilemma between truth in fact and truth in justice.

Since most people are saying the same thing—which is to say, they are saying nothing at all—it is in fact necessary to "search for 'true' meaning" in the "character of speakers." (6). Even though politically correct speech often arises from legitimate grievances, its use becomes an easy façade for those who would invoke language without subscribing to the ideals behind it. If I make myself obscure, here is an example: those genuinely concerned with ensuring equal opportunity regardless of race or class advocate ameliorating the "achievement gap." Since politicians can hardly express apathy about this problem to the public—and perhaps even to themselves—those unconcerned with the achievement gap adopt a concerned tone without incorporating their professed beliefs in policies. Such a course is shallow, both morally and intellectually. Therefore, the ultimate measure of intent must be deeds, and ad hominem inference is essential, if unfortunate, as a result. In the case of South Africa, the fact is that key players in Congress and the Reagan administration, from Dick Cheney to Armstrong Williams, showed zero sympathy for the plight of black South Africans. Does this mean that everyone who opposed sanctions was racist or morally negligent? No. But those who feigned compassion for the victims of apartheid deserved to have their positions impugned. Snake oil salesmen should not receive a free pass.

Since I find the essay compelling and largely agree with it, I would like to conclude with a possible point of disagreement. I question the notion that public discourse is often more polarized due to political correctness (8). I think that political correctness often obscures differences because it prevents discussion of the moral issues that reveal our most profound divisions. Certainly, we all have important values in common. As John Kennedy reminds us, "in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal." That said, what could be a greater source of difference than whether or not you place the same value on human life no matter race or nationality (most Americans do not)? Or whether or not you believe that, as a matter of principle if not policy, any businessman should have a yacht before a child has an education? It is our response to these questions that shape who we are, who we become and the footprints we will leave behind. To the extent that political correctness eclipses these issues, it diminishes are humanity.

[1] To channel from Bill Cosby, “Come on people!” Reid, a supporter of social justice causes, spoke the truth in the context of supporting a black candidate; Lott, who carried the Confederate flag as a cheerleader in college, lamented the loss of a Dixiecrat who, even after his death, remains an emblem of shameful discrimination.
[2]