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Great
Work!

FOR WHOM?

Qualitative Research, Representations,
and Social Responsibilities◆ Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Susan Weseen,
and Loonmun Wong

I grew up in a world in which talking about somebody's mama was a way of life, an everyday occurrence. For all of us, boys and girls, it was a kind of game or performance. Whether we called it "capping," "snapping," "ranking," "busting," or simply "the dozens," most of it was ridiculous, surreal humor bearing very little resemblance to reality: "Your mom's so fat she broke the food chain"; "Your mama's skin's so ashy she was a stand-in for Casper the Friendly Ghost"; "Your mama's so dumb she thought ring-around-the-collar was a children's game." More than anything, it was an effort to master the absurd metaphor, an art form intended to entertain rather than to damage. . . .

You would think that as a kid growing up in this world I could handle any insult, or at least be prepared for any slander tossed in the direction of my mom—or, for that matter, my whole family, my friends, or my friends' families. But when I entered college and began reading the newspaper, monographs, and textbooks on a regular basis, I realized that many academics, journalists, policymakers, and politicians had taken the "dozens" to another level. In all my years of playing the dozens, I have rarely heard vitriol as vicious as the words spouted by Riverside (California) county welfare director Lawrence Townsend: "Every time I see a bag lady on the street, I wonder, 'Was that an A.F.D.C. mother

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who hit the menopause wall—who can no longer reproduce and get money to support herself?” I have had kids tell me that my hair was so nappy it looked like a thousand Africans giving the Black Power salute, but never has anyone said to my face that my whole family—especially my mama—was a “tangle of pathology.” Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan has been saying it since 1965 and, like the one about your mama tying a mattress to her back and offering “roadside service,” Moynihan’s “snap” has been repeated by legions of analysts and politicians, including Dinesh D’Souza, the boy wonder of the far Right. (Kelly, 1997, pp. 1-2)

In this essay, we work through the decisions we made about how to represent the consequences of poverty on the lives of poor and working-class men and women in times of punishing surveillance and scrutiny by the state. We have discussed some of these issues—alternately called *ethics*, *dilemmas*, and simply *research*—with friends and colleagues. Some think we make “much ado about nothing.” Others are relieved that we are “saying aloud” this next generation of troubles. Many wish we would continue to hide under the somewhat transparent robe of qualitative research. And yet we are compelled to try to move a public conversation about researchers and responsibilities toward a sense of research for social justice.

Because we write between poor communities and social policy at a time of Right-wing triumph, and because we seek to be taken seriously by both audiences, we know it is essential to think through the power, obligations, and responsibilities of social research. Entering the contemporary montage of perverse representations of poor and working-class men and women, especially people of color, we write with and for community organizers, policy makers, local activists, the public, and graduate students.

This chapter represents a concrete analysis—an update, perhaps—of what Michelle Fine (1994) has called “working the hyphen”:

Much of qualitative research has reproduced, if contradiction-filled, a colonizing discourse of the “Other.” This essay is an attempt to review how qualitative research projects have Othered and to examine an emergent set of activist and/or

postmodern texts that interrupt *Othering*. First, I examine the hyphen at which Self-Other join in the politics of everyday life, that is, the hyphen that both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others. I then take up how qualitative researchers work this hyphen . . . [through] a messy series of questions about methods, ethics, and epistemologies as we rethink how researchers have spoken “of” and “for” Others while occluding ourselves and our own investments, burying the contradictions that percolate at the Self-Other hyphen. (p. 70)

We seek not necessarily to engage in simple reflexivity about how our many selves (Jewish, Asian, Canadian, woman, man, straight, gay) coproduce the empirical materials on which we report, although clearly that is an important piece of work (see Weis & Fine, in press). Instead, we gather here a set of self-reflective points of critical consciousness around the questions of how to represent responsibility, that is, transform public consciousness and “common sense” about the poor and working classes, write in ways that attach lives to racial structures and economies, and construct stories and analyses that interrupt and reframe the victim-blaming mantras of the 1990s.

Writing against the grain, we thought it would be useful to speak aloud about the politics and scholarship of decisions we have made.

◆ *Flexing Our Reflexivities*

In the social sciences, both historically and currently, the relationship between researcher and subject has been “obscured in social science texts, protecting privilege, securing distance, and laminating the contradictions” (Fine, 1994, p. 72). There has long been a tendency to view the self of the social science observer as a potential contaminant, something to be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized, and controlled. This bracketing of the researcher’s world is evident in social science’s historically dominant literary style (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995), which is predicated on a “clarion renunciation” of the subjective or personal as-

pects of experience (Morawski & Bayer, 1995), particularly those of researchers. As Ruth Behar (1993) explains, "We ask for revelations from others, but we reveal little or nothing of ourselves; we make others vulnerable, but we ourselves remain invulnerable" (p. 273). Our informants are then left carrying the burden of representations as we hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality.

Although it may be true that researchers are never absent from our texts, the problem of just how to "write the self [and, we would add, our political reflexivities] into the text" (Billig, 1994, p. 326) remains. Simply briefly inserting autobiographical or personal information often serves to establish and assert the researcher's authority, and ultimately produces texts "from which the self has been sanitised" (Okely, 1992, p. 5). But flooding the text with ruminations on the researcher's subjectivities also has the potential to silence participants/"subjects" (Lal, 1996).

It should also be pointed out that a call for the inclusion of subjective experience of the researcher into what has traditionally been conceived of as subject matter bears different implications for differently situated researchers. In the hands of relatively privileged researchers studying those whose experiences have been marginalized, the reflexive mode's potential to silence subjects is of particular concern. It is easy for reflexivity to slip into what Patricia Clough (1992) has called a "compulsive extroversion of interiority" (p. 63). In the words of Renato Rosaldo (1989), "If classic ethnography's vice was the slippage from the ideal of detachment to actual indifference, that of present-day reflexivity is the tendency for the self-absorbed Self to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other" (p. 7). Yet from an entirely different and overlapping perspective, some critical race theorists (e.g., Ladner, 1971; Lawrence, 1995; Matsuda, 1995) have suggested that for people of color whose stories have not been told, "the assertion of our subjective presence as creators and interpreters of text [is a] political act" (Lawrence, 1995, p. 349). According to Donna Haraway (1991), "Vision is always a question of the power to see—

and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices" (p. 192); who is afforded or appropriates—this power to see and speak about what is seen as well as what is hidden from scrutiny is a question that is at the heart of our examinations of our social responsibilities to write and re-present in a time of ideological assault on the poor. Thus we seek to narrate a form of reflexivity in our concerns with representation and responsibilities in these very mean times.

♦ The Textual Subject

In the remainder of this chapter, we reflect on the materials drawn for a book written by Michelle Fine and Lois Weis about poor and working-class city dwellers at the end of the 20th century, *The Unknown City* (1998). In this work, Michelle and Lois center the voices, politics, disappointments, and hopes of young urban adults. These men and women—African American, white, and Latino/Latina, poor and working-class—render oral histories of their struggles, victories, and passions, detailing lives filled with work (and its absence), schooling, family life, spirituality, sexuality, violence on the streets and in their homes, and social movements that seem no longer vibrant. Our analyses suggest that these young adults, men and women, constitute an unknown, unheard-from, and negatively represented constituency of the American democracy. Between the ages of 23 and 35, with neither the resources nor the sense of entitlement typically narrated by members of Generation X, they have been displayed and dissected in the media as the cause of national problems. Depicted as being the reason for the rise in urban crime, they are cast as if they embody the necessity for welfare reform, as if they sit at the heart of moral decay. Although much of contemporary social policy is designed to "fix" them, our investigation reveals that they have much to say back to policy makers and the rest of America.

The late 1990s witnessed a flood of books written about and sometimes despite those who

Nice thought

writing ourselves into text

Hum?

great!

Text analysis of their own Book

Their Book

about the Book

have been grouped together as the poor and working class. But the members of this group, particularly the young, are fundamentally unknown, at once quite visible as "moral spectacle" (Roman, 1997) and yet fundamentally invisible (A. J. Franklin, personal communication, October 14, 1997). As our nation walks away from their needs, desires, strengths, and yearnings, we abandon a generation. Millions of poor and working-class children continue to grow up amid the wreckage of global corporate restructuring, in the shadows of once-bustling urban factories, reinvigorated U.S. nationalism and racism, and a wholesale depletion of the public safety net, at the same time witnessing increasing violence in their communities and often in their homes. And mostly, they blame themselves and each other. The state retreat from the social good and corporate flight from urban centers, the North, and the United States are shockingly absent as blame is doled out. As calls to reverse civil rights, affirmative action, welfare, and immigration policies gain momentum, it is noteworthy that the voices of the men and women in the poor and working classes are never heard.

The Unknown City reveals not only common pains among members of the poor and the working class, but a deeply fractured urban America in the late 20th century. In spite of legislation and social politics designed to lessen inequality and promote social cohesion in the 1960s, we stand as a nation in the late 1990s deeply divided along racial, ethnic, social class, and gender lines. Our goals in conducting the research for *The Unknown City*, then, were to examine the commonalities among Americans and the fractured nature of U.S. society, focusing on what we call "communities of difference," as low-income people settle for crumbs in one of the richest nations in the world. We sought, further, to place these voices at the center of national debates about social policy rather than at the margin, where they currently stand. This chapter consciously reflects back on the work of writing that book—the headaches and struggles we experienced as we entered the battle of representations happening on, about, and despite but rarely with poor and working-class urban dwellers at the end of the 20th century. Amid economic dislocation and a contracted public sphere, we seek to

re-present men and women navigating lives of joy and disappointment, anger and laughter, despair and prayer.

Much as we sought to escape the narrow confines of demographic, essentialist categories, what we heard from both Jersey City and Buffalo tended to bring us back to these categories. That is, much as we all know, read, teach, and write about race, class, and gender as social constructions (see Fine, Powell, Weis, & Wong, 1997), loaded with power and complexity, always in quotation marks, when we listened to the taped interviews with African American men living in Jersey City or Buffalo, they were strikingly different from those of white men, or Latinas, or African American women. Indeed, both the very distinct material bases and cumulative historical circumstances of each of these groups and the enormous variety "within" categories demanded intellectual and political respect. So we tell the "big story" of people living in poverty as well as the particular stories narrated through gender, race, and ethnicity. Thus we write with and through poststructural understandings of identity and possibility, ever returning to "common" material bases (the economy, state, and the body) as we move through the nuances of "differences."

◆ On Framing the Work

On Community

Perhaps our most vexing theoretical dilemma swirled around the question, So, what constitutes a community? How do we write about real estate, land-bounded communities like Buffalo or Jersey City, geographically valid, zip-code-varied, "real" spaces in which we nevertheless found so little in the way of psychologically or socially shared biographies or visions?

We recognized from our theoretical interests, confirmed by the narratives we collected, that profound fractures, and variation, cut through lives within these communities. Simple demographic nuances, by race/ethnicity, gender, class, generation, and sexuality marked dramatic dis-

Tough
Life

Nice
Critical
Views

tinctions in experience. Within local neighborhoods or racial/ethnic groups, gender, sexuality, and generational divisions boldly sever what may appear to be, at first glance, internal continuities (see West, 1993). For instance, within the presumably "same" part of Jersey City, African Americans refer to local police practices with stories of harassment and fear, whereas whites are far more likely to complain about a rise in crime and to brag about a brother-in-law who's a cop. Whereas Jersey City whites described the "good old days" of economic security and pined for the day when they'd be moving to Bayonne, African Americans from the same block harbored few wistful memories of "good old days" and routinely avoided "getting stopped at red lights" in Bayonne, lest their stay be extended beyond what they expected.

At historic moments of job insecurity and economic hard times, the presumed harmony of working-class/poor communities is ravaged by further interior splits, finger-pointing, blame, and suspicion. Coalitions are few, even if moments of interdependence-for-survival are frequent. Within homes, differences and conflicts explode across genders and across generations.

A full sense of community is fictional and fragile, ever vulnerable to external threats and internal fissures. Although there is a class-based story to be told, a sense of class-based coherence prevails only if our methods fail to interrogate differences by race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. And yet, at the same time, commonalities across cities—by demography and biography—are all the more striking.

We could, therefore, write about life within these two urban communities, Jersey City and Buffalo, as though the notion of community were unproblematic, a geographic space of shared experience. Or we could, with equal ease and discomfort, present a book about African American men and women, white men and women, and Latinos and Latinas as though each group experiences a social world totally insulated from those of the others. Although some of our data press toward the latter, our theoretical and political inclinations make us look toward the former, searching for common ground, shared languages, and parallel experiences. Our text tries to speak, at once, in these

two dialects, to issues of the common and the specific, without diluting either. We decided that *The Unknown City* would offer two chapter forms: one that privileges the unique experiences of groups (for example, African American men) and another that explores the ways in which poor and working-class people travel over similar terrain (schooling, motherhood, crime) in their lives. Scripting a story in which we float a semifictional portrait of each community, we layered over an analytic matrix of differences "within." For our analysis—within and between cities—we delicately move between coherence and difference, fixed boundaries and porous borders, neighborhoods of shared values and homes of contentious interpretations.

On "Race"

Robin Kelly (1997) describes his latest book as "a defense of black people's humanity and a condemnation of scholars and policymakers for their inability to see complexity" (p. 4). Some academics have addressed this complexity: Henry Louis Gates (1985) has written beautifully about "race," always using quotes on the word; Michael Dyson (1993) argues against narrow nationalistic or essentialist definitions for either skin color or language; Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) forces us to theorize at the intersections of race and gender; and Stuart Hall (1981) narrates the contextual instability of racial identities, as do Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986). Like these theorists, our informants use/employ/conceive of race as both a floating unstable fiction and a fundamental, unerasable aspect of biography and social experience. Indeed, some of our informants, like the one quoted below, suggest that "race" constitutes inherently indefinable territory, offering narratives not so much of denial as complexity.

Mun: Your dad?

Luisa: Yes, my dad was the craziest Puerto Rican you had ever seen in the 70s. Oh my Lord.

Mun: What is your mom's background?

Luisa: Mom, Mom was raised Catholic, but in my mother's days, when an Irish and German woman went with a Chinese guy, in those days that was like, oh no, no that cannot happen.

Cool

Nice

Nice

My grandfather had to drop his whole family for my grandmother, so they could be together. Everybody disowned him in his family.

Mun: Because he married a—

Luisa: Yeah, he married my grandmother.

Mun: What about your mom's side?

Luisa: That is my mom's side.

Mun: What about your grandfather's side?

Luisa: My grandfather, he was in Vietnam, World War II, oh, I forgot the name. It was a very big war, that I know.

Mun: Korean War?

Luisa: Yeah, something like that, I just can't remember what it was. Yeah, he had honors and everything my mother told me.

Mun: So you looked very different?

Luisa: Yeah, I'm a mixture.

Mun: You have Chinese blood?

Luisa: Right. I got Irish and German, I got Puerto Rican and Italian, I have a lot. I'm a mixed breed.

Mun: I was wondering. The first time I saw you I thought you were from the Middle East.

Luisa: From the Middle East?

Mun: Yeah.

Luisa: Oh, golly gee, no. I'm, like, really mixed. I'm like everything. I got all these different personalities that just come out all the time. I swear to God. No lie. No lie.

When we began our interviews in Jersey City and Buffalo, we too were taken by poststructural thinking on questions of "race." With Stuart Hall (1997) particularly in mind, willing to acknowledge the artificiality, the performances, and, indeed, the racist "roots" of the notion of race (1/32nd drop of blood and the like), we constructed an interview protocol that generously invited our informants to "play" with "race" as we had. So we asked, in many clever ways, for them to describe time- and context-specific racial identifications—when they fill out census forms, when they walk through supermarkets, when alone or among friends. Informants of color tried to be polite and follow us in our "play," but by hour three they grew exasperated with these questions. White interviewees were either sure we were calling them racist

or avoided identifying as white—instead speaking about being Irish, Italian, or human. Needless to say, the "playfulness" of the questions didn't work.

Many argued that race *shouldn't* make much of a difference.¹ And we wanted, too, to write that book, not out of liberal foolishness but out of profound political commitments to class, race, and gender analyses and to "what should be." And yet, as we listened to our data, the life stories as narrated were so thoroughly drenched in racializing discourse that readers couldn't *not* know even an "anonymous" informant's racial group once they read the transcript. Personal stories of violence and family structure, narrative style, people's histories with money, willingness to trash (publicly) violent men and marriages, access to material resources, relations with kin and the state, descriptions of interactions with the police—all were talked through "race."

"Race" is a place in which poststructuralism and lived realities need to talk. "Race" is a social construction, indeed. But "race" in a racist society bears profound consequences for daily life, identity, and social movements and for the ways in which most groups "other." But how we write about "race" to a deeply race-bound audience worries us. Do we take the category for granted, as if it is unproblematic? By so doing, we (re)inscribe its fixed and essentialist positionality. Do we instead problematize it theoretically, knowing full well its full-bodied impact on daily life? Yes, "race" is a social construction, but it is so deeply confounded with racism that it bears enormous power in lives and communities. To the informants with whom we spoke, "race" does exist—it saturates every pore of their lives. How can we destabilize the notion theoretically at one and the same time as we recognize the lived presence of "race"?

To give a trivial, but telling, example: Here's a problem that may appear, at face value, to be a "sampling problem" related to "race." We struggled in both cities to find "equally poor" and "equally working-class" African American, Latino/Latina, and white young adults so that comparisons by race/ethnicity would not be confounded by class. Guess what? The world is

lousy with confounds. Although we did find poor and working-class whites, the spread and depth of their poverty was nowhere near as severe as in the African American sample. Our ambitious search for sampling comparability, in spite of our meticulous combing of raced neighborhoods, lost hands down to the profound "lived realities" of multigenerational poverty disproportionately affecting poor and working-class families of color. What may appear to be a methodological problem has been revealed as constitutive of the very fabric of society. Neither problematizing nor (re)inscribing "race" in our writing will help us, as a society, to confront the very real costs and privileges of racial categorization.

◆ *Inform(ing) and Consent: Who's Informed and Who's Consenting?*

With frame more or less clear, we move to the interviews. At this point, we struggle through the ethics of constructing narratives with poor men and women, each paid \$40 for an interview. So, we ask, what is consent? And for whom? Mun Wong confronted this dilemma often. The informed consent form for our interviews states:

We are conducting interviews with young adults on their perceptions of high school experiences and since. We are particularly interested in discussing concerns, attitudes, and aspirations (then and now) developed during your years in high school. . . . I, [respondent's name], agree to participate in this study on the urban experiences of young adults growing up in Jersey City during the 1980s and 1990s. The interviews will be audiotaped, transcribed and written up in a book. No names will be attached to the interviews.

The consent form sits at the contradictory base of the institutionalization of research. Although the aim of informed consent is presumably to protect respondents, informing them of the possibility of harm in advance and inviting them to withdraw if they so desire, it also effec-

tively releases the institution or funding agency from any liability and gives control of the research process to the researcher. Commenting on this standard formulaic piece of the research process, M. Brinton Lykes (1989) writes, "Reflecting on my experiences with the [informed consent] form revealed the complexity of both my role as researcher/activist and the constraints on developing collaboration between subjects in a context of real power imbalances" (p. 177). She continues:

The informed consent form which I introduced as a mechanism for "protecting the subjects" of the research project, was instead a barrier and forced me to confront the chasm between the needs and demands of research conducted within the boundaries of the university and the systems of trust and mistrust and of sharing and withholding that were already a part of this collaboration. (p. 178)

In our work, we have come to understand how the introduction of an informed consent form requires analysis as much as what are routinely and easily considered as "data"—such as the narratives of our participants. The (apparent) rapport that Mun had with respondents seemed to unravel whenever he presented the consent form. Many of them asked him, "What is this for?" He was always embarrassed when an explanation was required, in many cases simply mumbling an explanation. In some cases, contrary to official research protocol, he presented the consent form in the second part of the interview. Even so, many women simply signed the form as just another procedural matter, without reading the entire document. Their (apparent) nonchalance probably reflected their general attitude toward procedural matters. These respondents—women on welfare—are constantly required to read bureaucratic forms that are convoluted and technical, and are told to sign off on others' responsibilities while signing on to their own.

The informed consent form forced us to confront and contend with the explicitly differential relationships between the respondents and ourselves; it became a crude tool—a conscience—to remind us of our accountability and position. Stripping us of our illusions of friendship and rec-

yes!

iprocity, it made "working the hyphen" even more difficult. No matter how hard Mun tried to downplay "differences" and find a common ground from which to proceed, our participants' responses to the informed consent form reminded us to dispel any artificial attempts at displacing differences (Borland, 1991).

Judith Stacey (1991) has argued that (feminist) ethnography depends upon human relationships, engagement, and attachment, with the research process potentially placing research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal. She writes:

Situations of inauthenticity, dissimilitude, and potential, perhaps inevitable, betrayal situations are inherent in fieldwork research. For no matter how welcome, even enjoyable, the field worker's presence may appear to locals, social work often represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave. The inequality and potential treacherousness of this relationship is inescapable. (p. 113)

Dorcy came up to Mun after he finished his interview with Regina. She told him that she also wanted to be part of the study, and he told her that he would get to her when he completed the interviews with Melissa and Diane. So for the next 3 weeks or so, whenever Mun ran into Dorcy, she would ask, "When is my turn?" Mun would always give his typical reply to women who kept requesting interviews: "You are next, next week, okay?" "You better make sure," Dorcy laughed. Her repeated but friendly gestures, along with her gigglish laughs and timid smiles, were constant reminders: "I thought you said it was my turn."

At the beginning of their first interview, Dorcy and Mun sat facing each other in Room 216. Mun started off with his script: "Thanks for doing this. As you know, I am interviewing women about their experiences on welfare but also try to get a picture of their lives. This is a consent form and you may want to read it first. If you agree to abide by whatever is written there, please sign it. And I am going to tape-record this. Also, if you do not feel comfortable with what-

ever, just say you are going to skip it, okay?" She signed the form and the taped interview began.

Mun: How was your family . . . when you were growing up?

Dorcy: Oh, I had . . . I had a good growing . . . growing . . . I had it good. My mother, my father. My father died when I was 12. So, he was . . . he was always there for us, ya know. My mother, she's good. She's a strong woman. She love us and she take care of us . . . things we need. . . . and she help us out a lot . . . yeah.

Mun: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Dorcy: Excuse me?

Mun: Brothers and sisters?

Dorcy: Oh . . . um . . . three sisters, I make three sisters, and five brothers. I have . . . one of my brother died of AIDS, in '91 . . . of November . . . he died of AIDS.

Mun: What number are you?

Dorcy: I'm 25.

Mun: I mean, number in the family.

Dorcy: Oh, I'm . . . I'm in the middle.

Mun: [laughs]

Dorcy: [laughs] . . . I'm the middle . . . middle child.

Mun: Is it good?

Dorcy: It's good.

Mun: I mean . . . what . . .

Dorcy: It has its ups and downs, but it's good.

Mun: What do you mean?

Dorcy: Huh?

Mun: Ups and downs?

Dorcy: Because like, the oldest get things first and the baby get . . . more . . . the most things before the middle child will get. [And the interview continued.]

At first glance, this extract does not seem different from interviews with the other women. But if one looks more closely—and especially if one listens to the tape—Dorcy's hesitations, monosyllabic answers, and reluctance to speak up become noticeable. This is in sharp contrast to her speech outside of the interview process, as well as that of most of the other women inter-

My
Cigon
Research

Interviewing changes people!

viewed. At the end of the day, Mun recorded this short memo in his field notes:

Interviewed Dorcy today. She has been urging me for the past two weeks to interview her. And when I was talking to her today, she was giving me monosyllabic answers and speaking in such a soft tone that I could hardly make out a word she was speaking. She was driving me nuts with her inarticulations and "I don't know" . . . she refuses to elaborate her stories and discuss about her life. I don't know why I chose her. . . . I should have stuck to my initial choice of either Mary or Annie.

Thinking that their bantering and gestures were a process in developing a friendship, Mun felt a sense of betrayal and wondered whether Dorcy's friendliness had been a kind of staged performance designed to win his confidence.

Judith Stacey (1991) contends that in our fieldwork, the lives, loves, and tragedies that informants share with researchers are ultimately data—"grist for the ethnographic mill, a mill that has a truly grinding power" (p. 113). When the women are informed and they consent, does this mean that their stories (and aspects of their lives they choose—or feel compelled—to share) no longer belong to them? Does, for example, Mun inform the welfare agency of their problems with particular staff members? Does he interrupt or simply collect narration of the women's racial antagonisms, between and among groups? What about the time Rosita told him in the corridor that she saw her batterer ex-boyfriend walking with the program administrator, Deborah, the person who generously opened the program for his research? How best to respond to the information presented in one of the focus groups that Rosita had been sexually harassed by one of the instructors? Mun found himself working between an organization that was generous enough to allow us "access" and the allegiance and hard-earned trust of respondents. In many of these cases, he was the opportunistic "fly on the wall," recording observations without seeming to become entangled in these ethical conundrums (Roman, 1993). But, as Stacey has noted, ethnographic method is more likely to leave subjects exposed

to exploitation: The greater the intimacy, according to Stacey, the greater the danger. And yet, contrary to this view, many of the women and men we interviewed both recognized and delightfully exploited the power inequalities in the interview process. They recognized that we could take their stories, their concerns, and their worries to audiences, policy makers, and the public in ways that they themselves could not, because they would not be listened to. They (and we) knew that we traded on class and race privilege to get a counternarrative out. And so they "consented." They were both informed and informing.

♦ Then, the Stories

Moving from worries of consent to worries about "bad stories" we collected:

Mun: Do you feel that your word is not trusted, that you need someone else to say, you need a lawyer or psychiatrist to say everything is okay now?

Tara: Because of DYFS [Division for Youth and Family Services], yes.

Mun: But you can't have . . .

Tara: They won't, yeah. They won't just take you for your word, no. You need to have—

Mun: You need to have somebody else say that for you?

Tara: Yes. DYFS, yes.

Mun: How would DYFS treat your kids, though?

Tara: Because when you get child, they say I put their life in danger, because I did, but I was . . . I was in jail, I was in the psychiatric ward. They had to do the best interest for the children, I couldn't take care of them at the time.

Mun: Oh, so DYFS took your kids?

Tara: Yeah, so DYFS gave them to their father. I'm in court now.

Mun: At least it's not foster care, though.

Tara: That's what I said. They're with family. They might hate it there, they can't stand it. My kids say that they're treated worse.

Mun: They hate their father?

Wow!

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Tara: No, they don't hate their father, they hate their grandmother, they hate the mother-in-law, they hate their grandmother. They don't like their grandmother.

Mun: His mother?

Tara: Yeah, they don't like their aunts, their uncles.

Mun: They are a lot of Puerto Ricans?

Tara: They're all Puerto Ricans, but my kids were always like the outcasts because they didn't like me so my kids, my kids, I mean, George was 7 years old, 7 years of George's life, George had to have seen his grandmother six times. Nicole, in the 3 years of her life, never seen them. You know, my kids got dumped into a family that they know nothing about.

What does it mean to uncover some of what we have uncovered? How do we handle "hot" information, especially in times when poor and working-class women and men are being demonized by the Right and by Congress? How do we connect theoretically, empirically, and politically troubling social/familial patterns with macrostructural shifts when our informants expressly do not make, or even refuse to make, the connections?

The hegemony of autonomous individualism forces a self-conscious, imposed theorizing (by us) of especially "bad stories," well beyond the perspectives expressed by most of our informants. So, for instance, what do we do with information about the ways in which women on welfare virtually have to become welfare cheats—"Sure he comes once a month and gives me some money. I may have to take a beating, but the kids need the money"—in order to survive (Edin & Lein, 1997)? A few use more drugs than we wished to know about; most are wonderful parents, but some underattend to their children well beyond neglect. These are the dramatic consequences, and perhaps also the "facilitators," of hard economic times. To ignore the information is to deny the effects of poverty, racism, and abuse. To report these stories is to risk their more than likely misuse, all the while not studying the tax evasion, use of drugs, and neglect of children perpetrated by elites.

In a moment in history when there are few audiences willing to reflect on the complex social roots of community and domestic violence, the economic impossibilities of sole reliance on welfare, or even the willingness to appreciate the complexity of love, hope, and pain that fills the poor and working class, how do we put out for display the voyeuristic dirty laundry that litters our transcripts? Historian Daryl Michael Scott (1997), in his provocative book *Contempt and Pity*, places in historical perspective the perverse historic use of the "damaged black psyche" by both the Left and the Right today. To what extent do we contribute to this perverse legacy? Is it better if white poor and working-class people are also portrayed as "damaged"? At the same time, isn't it unethical to romanticize, and thereby deny, the devastating impact of the current and historic assault on poor and working-class families launched through the state, the economy, neighbors, and sometimes kin? We are left, then, with two questions: First, must we (i.e., social scientists) document damage in order to justify claims about oppression and injustice? Second, what is the role of the public intellectual in rewriting—that is, interrupting—the "commonsense" script of "their" damage (and, of course, our wholeness) and offering up, instead, a discourse of national damage, outrage, and demands for justice?

With interviews over, we continue to struggle with how best to represent the stories that may do more damage than good, depending on who consumes/exploits them—stories that reveal the adult consequences of physical and sexual abuse in childhood; stories that suggest it is almost impossible to live exclusively on welfare payments, which encourages many to "lie" about their incomes so that they self-define as "welfare cheats"; stories in which white respondents, in particular, portray people of color in gross and dehumanizing ways; data on the depth of violence in women's lives, across race/ethnicity. To what extent are we responsible to add, "Warning! Misuse of data can be hazardous to our collective national health"?

There are some academics writing about such concerns (Cross, 1991; hooks, 1990; Lather, 1991), but few who write about and work with

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activists to reimagine social research for social justice (for wonderful such work, see Austin, 1992; Lykes, 1989; Saegert, 1997). It is up to all of us to figure out how to say what needs to be said without jeopardizing individuals and feeding perverse social representations (McCarthy et al., 1997).

As with bad stories, we worried about our voyeuristic search for "good stories." While engaged in interviewing, the research assistants would gather informally and share stories. We talked about respondents not showing up for their interviews, the lives of interviewees, "funny things that happened along the way," our pain, and our early understanding of the material. The words and phrases thrown around included "interesting," "boring," "nothing out of the ordinary," "you should have heard this," and "this one has great stories." But just what did we mean by "great stories"?

Great stories can be read as allegories that shed light on both the level of content and the implications of that content. Allegory, as James Clifford (1986) reminds us,

denotes a practice in which a narrative fiction continuously refers to another pattern of ideas or events. It is a representation that "interprets" itself. . . . [It is] a story [that] has a propensity to generate another story in the mind of its reader (or hearer), to repeat and displace some prior story. . . . A recognition of allegory emphasizes the fact that realistic portraits, to the extent that they are "convincing" or "rich," are extended metaphors, patterns of associations that point to coherent (theoretical, esthetic, moral) additional meanings. . . . Allegory draws special attention to the narrative character of cultural representations, to the stories built into the representational process itself. (pp. 99-100)

We worry that what appear to be great stories might, however, feed our collective misunderstandings and renderings of the poor. Like experimenters who are inevitably inflicted with and inflicting "experimenter's bias," qualitative researchers carry misconceptions and "alluring fictions" (Clifford, 1986) of the subject. We enter the scene looking for stories and may, at times, "unintentionally behav[e] in such a way

as to make the prophesied event more likely to occur" (Suls & Rosnow, 1988, p. 168). By looking for great stories, we potentially walk into the field with constructions of the "other," however seemingly benevolent or benign, feeding the politics of representation and becoming part of the negative figuration of poor women and men.

For us, the fundamental "good story" is not simply one laced with "social problems" such as homelessness, welfare, and/or sexual harassment—a victim who is harassed, battered, and overwhelmed by problems. In retrospect, we admit that we also searched for agents who "resisted," enacting the role of the critic of the state and/or economic relations. As Mun's interviews with women on welfare proceeded, he always hoped that they would be perfect critics, able to pierce the veil of structured and state hypocrisy. It is interesting to note how so many hegemonic and victim-blaming positions were narrated by these profoundly oppressed men and women; judgments about "others" often resonated with a broad cultural discourse of holding victims of poverty, racism, and sexual violence accountable for their woes. In many of our interviews, poor women on welfare blamed other women, labeling them "welfare queens," "neglectful mothers," and "insensitive bureaucrats." Our own romanticized images of the resistor—one who desires to speak out against injustice and to act with a collective—turned on us.

Once we collect "great (and not so great) stories" from our respondents, the next difficult stage is the interpretation, representation, and analysis of data. We have, at times, consciously and deliberately left out some of these "great stories" that have the potential to become "bad data" to buttress stereotypes, reaffirm the ideology and rhetoric of the Right, and reinscribe dominant representations. As Hurtado and Stewart (1997) have written, the repetition of certain hurtful and vicious opinions and attitudes will inflict pain on those who are the "victims." In such cases, what is required is "minimal documentation, when views are all-too-familiar and oppressive, while holding ourselves and others to a very high standard of analytic depth when work carries such a high risk of causing suffering in those

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already the objects of daily racism" (p. 308)—and a close focus, as well, on the mundane.

What happens to the dull details of negotiating daily life in poverty that do not capture our attention in the way that "great stories" do?

Well, I take . . . I get \$424 a month, okay? And I get \$270 in food stamps, so I take . . . there's four weeks to a month, so I take . . . I take the \$270 and I divide it by four. And that's what I spend on food. It's just me and my daughters. And my oldest don't eat that much and I don't eat. . . . I only eat once a day. I only eat dinner. I'm not hungry in the morning and I don't have breakfast. I have a cup of coffee or hot chocolate. My little one is the one that eats a lot. And whatever I don't . . . like I spend \$65 a week in food. I go and I buy meat every day and I buy their breakfast, their lunch, her snacks for school. And whenever I can . . . I work at night . . . I work . . . if I get a call I go and clean somebody's house. I do that. Their father gives me money, you know. So I do whatever I . . . you know, whatever it takes, you know? Shovel your snow . . . [laughs] I don't care. You know, to me money's money, as long as your kids got what they need. But basically their father helps me the most. You know, he'll come in . . . oh, my dad does this, too, and I get really pissed off at him. He'll come in and he'll start looking through my cabinets and in my refrigerator, and my closet. "Well, what do you have here?" And it's like, "I'm fine. Johnny's coming over later." "No! Blah, blah, blah." And he'll go out and he'll come back with food, and their father's always coming in looking through the refrigerator, and things like that, you know? I always . . . my kids have food, so that's good, you know? They never go hungry. You know, I . . . I hate to say this, but if I had . . . I mean, if it came to where my kids were gonna go hungry, I'd sell my body. To hell with that! My kids ain't gonna starve, you know? I'd do what it takes. I would give two shits. People could . . . my friends could tell me whatever they wanted. I have a . . . I have two friends that sell their bodies for money for their kids. And thank God, I have to knock on wood, I never had to take a loan, if I had to, I would. If that's what it took to feed my kids. . . . I mean, if their father . . . a lot of people that are on welfare have husbands worth shit. They don't care. If they had a father, but I guess that's, if that's what it took. . . . I would try every aspect before doing that. But if that's what it really took to feed my kids, that's what I would do. I would do whatever it takes to feed and clothe my kids, you know, and put a roof over their head. I wouldn't

care what the hell it was. I guess that's what I would do, you know?

When we listen to and read narratives, researchers (we) tend to be drawn to—in fact, to code for—the exotic, the bizarre, the violent. As we reflect on narratives of poverty we nevertheless feel obligated to explore meticulously the very tedious and mundane sections of the transcripts, those huge sections that are not very exciting: the mundane spots, where "they" (the informants) do what "we" (the researchers) admit that "we" do—walk their kids to school, read the newspaper, turn on the television for a break, look for a doctor they can trust, hope their children are safe on the way home from school. These mundane rituals of daily living—obviously made much more difficult in the presence of poverty and discrimination, but mundane nonetheless—are typically left out of ethnographic descriptions of life in poverty. They don't make very good reading, and yet they are the stuff of daily life. We recognize how careful we need to be so that we do not construct life narratives spiked only with the hot spots.

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◆ Different Methods, Different Stories

Once the interviews are complete, triangulation surfaces as a critical element in the practice of social science: "adding" one layer of data to another to build a confirmatory edifice. In quantitative data analysis, triangulation occurs when multiple items within the same scale measure the same construct, or when two different scales join to measure the same construct. In psychological research in particular, and sociological research at times, the tendency is to use qualitative methods to supplement quantitative data.

However, in our work, conducted primarily through narratives but also through surveys on political engagement, we were not looking for a simple, coherent synthesis of data or methods. With a firm reliance on multiple methods, we

sought to cross over, converse with, and tap into the different kinds of data; we searched for the very contradictions between methods that would most powerfully inform policy. We learned, as Fine and Weis (1996) have written elsewhere:

Methods are not passive strategies. They differently produce, reveal, and enable the display of different kinds of identities. To be more specific, if individual interviews produce the most despairing stories, evince the most minimal sense of possibility, present identities of victimization, and voice stances of hopelessness, in focus groups with the same people the despair begins to evaporate, a sense of possibility sneaks through, and identities multiply as informants move from worker to mother, to friend, to lover, to sister, to spiritual healer, to son, to fireman, to once-employed, to welfare recipient. In the context of relative safety, trust, comfort, and counterhegemonic creativity offered by the few free spaces into which we have been invited, a far more textured and less judgmental sense of self is displayed. In these like-minded communities that come together to trade despair and build hope, we see and hear a cacophony of voices filled with spirit, possibility, and a sense of vitality absent in the individual data. (pp. 267-268)

We recognize that different methodologies are likely to illuminate different versions of men's and women's understandings of welfare, jobs, education, and violence. Convergence is unlikely and, perhaps, undesirable. Following a poststructuralist emphasis on contradiction, heterogeneity, and multiplicity, we produced a quilt of stories and a cacophony of voices speaking to each other in dispute, dissonance, support, dialogue, contention, and/or contradiction. Once women's and men's subjectivities are considered and sought after as if multiple, varied, conflicting, and contradictory, then the "data elicited" are self-consciously dependent upon the social locations of participants and the epistemological assumptions of the methods. We join Kum Kum Bhavnani (1993), who demands that multiple methods and a deep commitment to engaging with differences (particularly between researcher and researched) form the core of provocative, politically engaged so-

cial science, so that we "cannot be complicit with dominant representations which reinscribe inequality. It follows from a concern with power and positioning that the researcher must address the micropolitics of the conduct of research and . . . given the partiality of all knowledges, questions of differences must not be suppressed but built into research" (p. 98). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest:

Qualitative research is inherently multimethod in focus (Brewer & Hunter, 1989). However, the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objective reality can never be captured. Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation (Denzin, 1989a, 1989b, p. 244; Fielding & Fielding, 1986, p. 33; Flick, 1992, p. 194). The combination of multiple methods, empirical materials, perspectives and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, and depth to any investigation (see Flick, 1992, p. 194). (p. 2)

♦ In Whose Voice?

Mark, a white working-class informant tells us:

It goes into another subject where blacks, um, I have nothing against blacks. Um, whether you're black, white, you know, yellow, whatever color, whatever race. But I don't like the black movement where, I have black friends. I talk to them and they agree. You know, they consider themselves, you know, there's white trash and there's white, and there's black trash and there's blacks. And the same in any, you know, race. But as soon as they don't get a job, they right away call, you know, they yell discrimination.

In whose voice do we write? Well, of course, our own. But we also present long narratives, colorful and edited, drawn with/from informants. Some of these narratives, particularly from the sample of working-class and poor white men, contain hostile, sometimes grotesque references to "others"—people of color, women, black men on the corner. As theorists we refrain from the

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naïve belief that these voices should stand on their own or that voices should (or do) survive without theorizing. However, we also find ourselves differentially theorizing and contextualizing voices. That is, those voices that historically have been smothered—such as the voices of working-class white women, and men and women of color—we typically present on their own terms, perhaps reluctant to surround them with much of “our” theory (Weis, Marisza, & Fine, 1998). And yet when we present the voices of white men who seem eminently expert at fingering African American men for all the white men’s pain and plight, we theorize boldly, contextualize wildly, rudely interrupting “them” to reframe “them” (Weis & Fine, 1996; Weis, Proweller, & Centrie, 1997).

Is this an epistemological double standard in need of reform, or is it a form of narrative affirmative action, creating discursive spaces where few have been in the past? Aida Hurtado and Abigail Stewart (1997), in a fascinating essay titled “Through the Looking Glass: Implications of Studying Whiteness for Feminist Methods,” argue that feminist scholars should self-consciously underplay (e.g., not quote extensively) hegemonic voices in our essays and as relentlessly create textual room for counter-hegemonic narratives. Although we agree, we also think it is vitally important for us to analyze, critically, what it is that white men are saying about us, about “them,” about economic and social relations. To do this, we interpret their words, their stories, and their assertions about “others.”

This raises what we have come to think of as the “triple representational problem.” We ponder how we present (a) ourselves as researchers choreographing the narratives we have collected; (b) the narrators, many of whom are wonderful social critics, whereas some, from our perspective, are talented ventriloquists for a hateful status quo; and (c) the “others” who are graphically bad-mouthed by these narrators, such as caseworkers blamed for stinginess and disrespect by women on welfare, African American men held responsible for all social evils by white men, and police officers held in contempt by communities of color, which have endured

much abuse at the hands of the police. Do we have a responsibility to theorize the agency/innocence/collusion of these groups, too? When white men make disparaging comments about women of color, do we need to re-present women of color and denounce and re-place these representations? If not, are we not merely contributing to the archival representations of disdain that the social science literature has already so horrifically chronicled?

Given that all of these participants deserve to be placed within historical and social contexts, and yet power differences and abuses proliferate, how do theorists respect the integrity of informants’ consciousness and narratives, place them within social and historical context, and yet not collude in the social scientific gaze, fixation, moral spectacularizing (Roman, 1997) of the poor and working-class? There are no easy answers to these dilemmas. In *The Unknown City* we try to contextualize the narratives as spoken within economic, social, and racial contexts so that no one narrator is left holding the bag for his or her demographic group, but indeed there are moments when, within the narratives, “others”—people of color, caseworkers, men, women, the neighbor next door—are portrayed in very disparaging ways. Then we wage the battle of representation. We work hard to figure out how to represent and contextualize our narrators, ourselves, and the people about whom they are ranting. We try, with the tutelage of historians Joan Scott (1992), Michael Katz (1995), Robin Kelly (1997), and Daryl Scott (1997), sociologist Joyce Ladner (1971), literary critic Eve Sedgwick (1990), and psychologist William Cross (1991), to understand how and why these binaries, these categories of analysis, these “others,” these splittings, and these accusations are being cast at this moment in history, and who is being protected by this social science focus on blame (Opatow, 1990). Nevertheless, at times audiences have been alarmed at the language in our texts, at the vivid descriptions and the portraits, for instance, of seemingly cold and heartless social workers. We are working on these issues, and we welcome help from others who are also struggling with both theory and empirical data.

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◆ *What's Safe to Say Aloud
and by Whom?*

How hard it is for us to *think* we can choose to become writers, much less *feel* and *believe* that we can. What have we to contribute, to give? Our own expectations condition us. Does not our class, our culture as well as the white man tell us writing is not for women such as us?

The white man speaks: *Perhaps if you scrape the dark off your face. Maybe if you bleach your bones. Stop speaking in tongues, stop writing left-handed. Don't cultivate your colored skins nor tongues of fire if you want to make it in a right-handed world.* (Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 166)

We have collected stories for the past 6 years on communities, economic and racial relationships, and individual lives deeply affected by public policies and institutions that had been rotten and rotting for many years before that. And yet these very same public policies and institutions, the ones about which we have deeply incriminating data, are today being excised, yanked away from communities as we speak—public schools, welfare, social services, public housing. Positioning a critique of the public sphere as it evaporates, or, more aptly, as it is targeted for downsizing and for demise, seems an academic waste of time. At its worst, it anticipates collusion with the Right. Nevertheless, the criticisms are stinging:

Tamara: I didn't want to be with the father of my children anymore. And at that time he really gave me a lot of headaches. "If you don't stay with me, then I'm not gonna help you with the kids." Which he really didn't do, which I'm thankful. But I just figured, "Well, the hell with it. Then I'll work . . . get the welfare." Because I pay \$640 for this apartment. That's a lot of money for a two-bedroom apartment, you know? And the welfare only gives me \$424, so I have to make up the difference. And plus I have a telephone, you know. I have cable for my daughters, you know. And it's just a lot of money. And I figure, you know, I figured, well, I couldn't make it on my own. I wasn't making enough

to make it on my own back then, so I had to go on welfare. So I did it, and it was . . . I didn't like it. I didn't like sitting there. I didn't like the waiting. I didn't like the questions they asked me, you know?

Mun: What kind of questions did—

Tamara: Well, they asked me if I was sexually active, how many times I went to bed with him, you know? And I told the guy, "I'm sorry, but that is none of your business," and I refuse to answer the questions. Because to me, well what, they ask you if you, he asked me if I slept with black men or white men, Puerto Rican men. What was my preference. And to me that was the questions—

Mun: Was this on a form, or he—

Tamara: No, he was just asking questions, you know? And I refused to answer them, you know. And he kind of like got upset. "We have to ask you this." I was like, "Bullshit." You know, they just wanted to, they asked, he asked me how many times I had sex in a day, and just really, you know, if I douched, if I was clean, if I took a shower. I don't think these are any of your business, you know? I take a shower every night and every day, you know? I think those are stupid questions he asked. I was, he asked me how many men I had in my life that I had, you know, if I have more than one man. And I turned around and told him, "I'm not your mother." I never heard of questions like—[laughs]

Mun: Neither have I. [laughs]

Tamara: They asked the weird questions.

Mun: So, how, what was the procedure like?

Tamara: It was embarrassing. Like, with Medicaid, for kids it's good. For kids, you know, you can go anywhere you want with the Medicaid. You can go to the doctors for kids. You know, they pay for braces. When it comes to an adult, I was going to, I was hemorrhaging. I was going to a doctor. I'd been bleeding since December, okay, and they're telling me, I've been going to a gynecologist through the welfare. "It's normal, it's normal. Don't worry about it. It's normal." So last week I was getting ready, for the past week I was feeling really dizzy and really weak, and I said the hell with it. Let me go see a gynecologist. And I

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paid her. Thank God, you know, the Medicaid took care of the hospital. But I had to pay her \$700 for the procedure that I had to have done. [laughs] I had to do it. It was either that or bleed to death, you know. [laughs] But a lot of doctors, I asked her, because she used to take Medicaid. And I asked her, "Why don't you, you know, take Medicaid anymore?" And a lot of doctors that don't, doctors tell you because they don't pay them. She said she's been waiting for people that were on Medicaid to get paid for 2 years, 3 years, bills—that's how old the bills are and she's still waiting to get paid.

Our responsibility in this work, as we see it, is not to feed the dismantling of the state by posing a critique of the public sector as it has been, but instead to insist on a state that serves its citizenry well and responsibly. That is, social researchers must create vision and imagination for "what could be" and demand the resurrection of an accountable public sphere that has a full and participatory citizenship at its heart. Then we can layer on the critiques of "what has been." That said, it is important to note that it is not so easy when many are just waiting to use our narrative words to do away with welfare; when Brett Schundler, mayor of Jersey City, is desirous of getting voucher legislation passed in a city in which public schools enjoy little to no positive reputation; when Charles Murray (1984) will abduct our phrases as he paints poor women as lazy and irresponsible. Creating a safe space for intellectual, critical, and complicated discussion when the Right has been so able and willing to extract arguments that sustain the assault may be a naïve wish, but it is a worthwhile one.

◆ On "Safe Spaces"

In conducting our research for *The Unknown City*, we heard from young women and men who grew up within the working-class and poor segments of our society how they view economic opportunities; how they spin images of personal

and collective futures, especially as related to the power of schooling; how they conceptualize the shrinking public sector, the economy, labor, and the military; and how they reflect upon progressive social movements that have historically and dramatically affected their ancestors' and their own life chances. We heard about a disappearing public sphere but we tripped upon, as well, those urban pockets of counterhegemonic possibility, sites of critique, engagement, and outrage, excavated by these young men and women. Amid their despair lies hope. And hope appears to be cultivated in these "safe" spaces. So how to write on and through these spaces without romanticizing the tiny corners of sanctuary and possibility available to and created by the poor and working-class in the late 1990s? If people are surviving with hope and optimism, is devastation justified or managed?

The spaces into which we have been invited provide recuperation, resistance, and the makings of "home." They are not just a set of geographic/spatial arrangements, they are theoretical, analytic, and spatial displacements—a crack, a fissure in an organization or a community. Individual dreams, collective work, and critical thoughts are smuggled in and then reimagined. Not rigidly bounded by walls/fences, the spaces often are corralled by a series of (imaginary) borders where community intrusion and state surveillance are not permitted. These are spaces where trite social stereotypes are fiercely contested. That is, these young women and men, in their constant confrontation with harsh public representations of their races, ethnicities, classes, genders, and sexualities, use these spaces to break down these public images for scrutiny, and to invent new ones.

These spaces include the corners of the African American church where young men ponder how to "take back the streets" to "save the young boys"; the lesbian and gay center carved out quietly by working-class late adolescents and young adults seeking identities and networks when their geographic and cultural contexts deny them sexual expression; the Head Start and EPIC (Every Person Influences Children) programs in which poor mothers, and sometimes fa-

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thers, come together to talk about the delights and the minefields of raising children in a culture showered in racism and decimated by poverty; the cultural arts programs where men and women join self-consciously across racial and ethnic borders to create what is "not yet," a space, a set of images, a series of aesthetic products that speak of a world that could be (Weis & Fine, in press).

Spaces such as these spring from the passions and concerns of community members; they are rarely structured from "above." They may be one-time fictions, transitory, or quite stable. They can be designed to restore identities devastated by the larger culture, or they may be opportunities to try on identities and communities rejected by both mainstream culture and local ethnic groups. These spaces hold rich and revealing data about the resilience of young adults without denying the oppression that threatens the borders and interiors of community life amid urban poverty.

Legitimately, one may ask (and some have) whether we have any business floating through or writing about these sequestered quarters. Does our presence affect or interrupt the music of life within "free spaces"? Does our social scientific voyeurism shatter the sanctity of that which is presumably (although recognizably not) "free"?

We come down on these questions, for the moment at least, by presenting two different incidents. One occurred in a basement office in which New Jersey community activists met to discuss local politics. We were welcomed for the initial interview, but the notion of our continued presence clearly provoked discomfort. Not asked to return, we left—in good stead and with enormous respect. In contrast, for instance, we have been invited into some spaces (e.g., an EPIC parenting group, a black church, a community center, a lesbian and gay club) in which members, directors, and others indicate they are eager for documentation—eager for others to know who they "really" are, what functions their programs serve, how deeply spiritual and religious "those teenage mothers" can be, how organized and supportive "those gays and lesbians" are. They have welcomed us into their

spaces to "exploit" our capacity—our class and professional positions and networks—and our willingness to write and to testify to those aspects of community life that the media ignore, that stereotypes deny, that mainstream culture rarely gets to see. And yet we seek not to romanticize resilience—for these spaces represent severe critique as well as warm comfort.

♦ On Responsibilities

We have certainly read much, and even written a fair amount, about researchers' subjectivities (Fine, 1994). Our obligation is to come clean "at the hyphen," meaning that we interrogate in our writings who we are as we coproduce the narratives we presume to "collect," and we anticipate how the public and policy makers will receive, distort, and misread our data. It is now acknowledged that critical ethnographers have a responsibility to talk about our identities, why we interrogate what we do, what we choose not to report, how we frame our data, on whom we shed our scholarly gaze, who is protected and not protected as we do our work. What is our participatory responsibility to research with and for a more progressive community life? As part of this discussion, we want to try to explain how we, as researchers, have worked with communities to capture and build upon exciting community and social movements. In other words, we will put forward parts of our ever-evolving political agenda, sharing the kinds of scholarship/action that we are focusing upon and how our work has been reshaped by the activism in the communities studied.

Thus far, in Jersey City and Buffalo we have been able to document how state policies and local economic/social shifts have affected young women's and men's belief systems, worldviews, social consciousness. Through individual interviews we have gathered much of this information. Through focus groups (e.g., in the lesbian and gay club, in the African American and white churches, in the EPIC parenting group, in the Latina homeless shelter, in the Pre-Cap college

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program for young adolescents), we have been able to create settings in which our interviewees have begun to weave together analyses about their commitments, for instance, to the "next generation of African American boys" or to "practicing the ways of my grandmother" around Latina spiritual rituals. An activist nun and a local director of Head Start have both invited us to work more closely with groups of women and men in their programs, running focus groups that would raise questions, press issues, and help the participants reshape programs. A college preparation program for "at-risk" youths (labels!) asked us for an evaluation to assist with further funding. In the EPIC group, we were told that the engagement of several members was raised due to the kind of individual and group work in which we were involved. For these women the group interviews offered them a way of piecing together the strengths of their lives, encouraging forward movement as they were raising their families in the midst of poverty. Indeed, Lois Weis was asked to facilitate an EPIC group on a long-term basis.

Further, throughout the course of our 5 years of research, we have moved across the researcher-researched hyphen and into a community of activists to apply our work to support local policy and community efforts. Michelle Fine testified at state hearings in Trenton and in Jersey City on the state takeover of the local schools, advocating with community groups that the state remain in control until authentic local participation can be encouraged and sustained; Mun Wong coordinated a project among women on welfare who were eager to document the differential supermarket prices of similar items at different points in the month and in different markets in the community; Lois Weis supplied testimony in support of continual funding for EPIC; and in Jersey City, we have provided census and qualitative data to city council members from the Latino community. Our graduate students have been deeply involved in various communities as they engage in dissertation work in an Irish community center, an African American church, a neighborhood center that serves white working-class youth, a neighborhood arts center, and numerous others. In all such spaces,

graduate students are "giving back" to the communities in which they are working. Across communities, numerous conversations have taken place with key policy makers on a number of issues arising from our data.

We take for granted that the purpose of social inquiry in the 1990s is not only to generate new knowledge but to reform "common sense" and inform critically public policies, existent social movements, and daily community life. A commitment to such "application," however, should not be taken for granted. This is a(nother) critical moment in the life of the social sciences, one in which individual scholars are today making decisions about the extent to which our work should aim to be "useful."

We have colleagues who embrace the commitment to "application," as we do, even if some think it is naïve for us to imagine our being able to infiltrate current policy talk on life within poor and working-class communities; other colleagues have long seen their own scholarship as explicitly aimed toward political and social change (see the work of Gittell, 1990, 1994; Lykes, 1994; Mullings, 1984; Piven & Cloward, 1971; Powell, 1994). And yet we hear a growing chorus of colleagues (on the Right and the Left) who presume that if one is interested in, engaged by, or drawn to policy, one's scholarship is less trustworthy, tainted by advocacy, commitment, passion, or responsibilities. This latter position was perhaps in retreat for a moment in time, but it seems to be returning to the academy in well-orchestrated volume. We do, of course, reject this latter position, but would ask again that academics who see y/our work as deeply nested in community life (recognizing that the notion of "community" is up for grabs) come together to argue cogently our responses to the litany: Is this science? Is this advocacy? Is only progressive work biased? Is this politics or policy?

We must probe to find the sites of intellectual leverage, responsibility, and obligation through which our work can begin to fissure public and political discourse, shifting the ideological and material grounds on which poor and working-class men and women are now being tortured. That said, we take our responsibilities to these communities seriously, and Lois and

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Michelle are educating their graduate students to work with—not on or despite—local community efforts.

It is important to note another “underground debate” within community studies, which concerns the tension between representing historically oppressed groups as “victimized” and “damaged” or as “resilient” and “strong.” This may seem an artificial and dangerous dichotomy—we think it is. But we have encountered colleagues within feminism, critical race theory, poverty work, disability studies, and, most recently, queer theory who argue across these intellectual stances, with these two “choices” carved out as the (presumably only) appropriate alternatives. We share the worries, but worry more about the fixed “choices” that are being offered. Simple stories of victimization, with no evidence of resistance, resilience, or agency, are seriously flawed and deceptively partial; they deny the rich subjectivities of persons surviving amid devastating social circumstances. Equally dreary, however, are the increasingly popular stories of individual heroes who thrive despite their difficulties, denying the burdens of surviving amid such circumstances.

We stretch toward writing that spirals around social injustice and resilience, that recognizes the endurance of structures of injustice and the powerful acts of agency, that appreciates the courage and the limits of individual acts of resistance but refuses to perpetuate the fantasy that “victims” are simply powerless. That these women and men are strong is not evidence that they have suffered no oppression. Individual and collective strength cannot be used against poor and working-class people as evidence—“See? It’s not been so bad!” We need to invent an intellectual stance in which structural oppression, passion, social movements, and evidence of strength, health, and “damage” can all be recognized and theorized without erasing essential features of the complex story of injustice that constitutes urban life in poverty.

We take solace in the words of many of our African American male informants—drawn from churches and spiritual communities—who testify, as one said, that “only belief and hope

will save our communities. We have come a long, long way . . . and we have much further to go. Only belief will get us through.” Amid the pain, the despair, survives hope. This, too, is a big part of community life, rarely seen in the light of day.

♦ Conclusion

We end this essay with a set of what might be called ethical invitations or, put more boldly, ethical injunctions. We offer these in the spirit of wedging open and contributing to a conversation about researcher responsibility, recognizing, of course, that questions of responsibility-for-whom will, and should, forever be paramount—because the “whom” is not a coherent whole, no single constituency, no unified community, group, or set of “others,” and because the context in which we write today will change tomorrow, and so too will the readings of this text.

We write on the ethics of responsibility because we don’t want to write only for and with friends; we hope to write in ways that contribute to a reshaping of the “common sense” about poverty, the economy, and social and human relations. We consider, then, the ethics of writing research in the interest of social justice and the ethics of publishing what Richardson (1995) has called “writing-stories.” We offer the ideas below as lenses through which social analyses might be continually reassessed and (re)imagined.

On Reframing What Seems Like Good and Bad News

Our first injunction is that social researchers dare to speak hard truths with theoretical rigor and political savvy. By that, we mean that “bad stories,” like “good stories,” are always partial but/and deserve a hearing. They reveal as much as they conceal, whether informants seem too close or too far. Having witnessed the Right-wing assault on education, health care, welfare, and immigration in this country, we have become more convinced, not less, that progressive activists and researchers need to interrogate with deliberation—not camouflage with romance—some of

the rough spots in our work. To obscure the bad news is to fool no one. Indeed, the suffocation of "bad stories" only tempers the very real stories of oppression we seek to tell. That there are (unevenly distributed) damaging consequences to all living under advanced capitalism, racist social relations, violent gendered relations, and homophobic community life is no great secret. That individuals engage in activities or behaviors deemed illegal, unethical, or immoral in contexts in which justice and fairness have no role is evidence of social injustice—not a reason to blame victims. That many thrive despite the odds is equally well-known. How survival, damage, and oppressive social/economic relations meld together is the task of explanation that lies before us. How to inform and encourage social movements for "what could be" is the task at hand. Thus, indeed, we err on the side of telling many kinds of stories, attached always to history, larger structures, and social forces, offered neither to glamorize nor to pathologize, but to re-view what has been, to re-imagine what could be in communities of poverty and the working class, and to re-visit, with critical speculation, lives, relations, and communities of privilege.

Upon Reflections

We ask, second, that beginning and veteran researchers, and all those in between, pose a set of questions to themselves as they move through the recursive "stages" of social analysis. These questions are listed in no particular order, and have few right answers. But, we insist, they should be asked, as we all write what we write in a world not (necessarily) prepared to hear.

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- ① Have I connected the "voices" and "stories" of individuals back to the set of historic, structural, and economic relations in which they are situated? We mean this in no linear fashion, in no simple determinative progression, but only to recognize that what people say has a relation to the structures and ideologies around them in ways that will almost certainly not be narrated by interviewees them-

selves. The work of theory is to articulate these relations, excavating how qualitative narratives or even quantitative responses on a 5-point Likert scale are nested within a system of historic and material conditions.

- ② Have I deployed multiple methods so that very different kinds of analyses can be constructed? In our work on *The Unknown City*, we found that individual and focus group interviews generated very different kinds of narrations—neither more true than the other, but different, particularly when it came to individuals expressing optimism or pessimism about the future and their place in it. We came to understand that it was important to theorize why and how responses took different forms, not seeking simple confirmation, or concluding too easily that there is contradiction, or one narration is more "true" than the other. Instead, we struggled to cultivate a theoretical relation between possibly very different responses, understanding that the issue of "triangulation" is not simple. Different people do, in fact, seem the same but different at times. The same person can do the same. We cannot see this as "contradictory," or worse, useless data, as this can cause us to miss important facets of individual and community life.
- ③ Have I described the mundane? As we have noted, we found it hard to resist the temptation to surf through our transcripts with a coding eye toward the exotic or the violent. Coding tends to lend itself to that. And yet most of our transcripts reveal the boring details of life on the ground, day-to-day interactions with friends, kin, neighbors, children, and television. These portraits, although rarely stunning, constitute much of life in poverty and should not be relegated to the edited-out files.
- ④ Have some informants/constituencies/participants reviewed the material with me and interpreted, dissented, challenged

my interpretations? And then how do I report these departures/agreements in perspective? This is not a call for handing over veto power, but only a call for conversation, negotiated interpretations, texts in which multiple interpretations flourish, in which challenges are integrated into the manuscript. Much of this work can take place in follow-up focus groups to either participant observation work or individual interviews.

5. How far do I want to go with respect to theorizing the words of informants? That is, with respect to what Fine and Weis (1996) have called the triple representation problem, have you worked to understand your contribution to the materials/narrations provided and those silenced? Have you worked to explain to readers the position from which informants speak? Have you worked to recast the person(s) whom the informant chooses to "blame" or credit for social justice or injustice (be it a social worker, the informant's mother, black men)? Again, we do not hold out that all researchers must answer yes to these questions—only that researchers (faculty and graduate students) must ask themselves these questions and understand why it is that some answers must be no.

6. Have I considered how these data could be used for progressive, conservative, repressive social policies? How might the data be heard? Misread? Misappropriated? Do you need to add a "warning" about potential misuse?

7. Where have I backed into the passive voice and decoupled my responsibility for my interpretations? That is, where have you hidden your own authority behind "their" narrations or "their" participatory interpretations?

8. Who am I afraid will see these analyses? Who is rendered vulnerable/responsible or exposed by these analyses? Am I willing to show him/her/them the text before publication? If not, why not? Could I

publish his/her/their comments as an epilogue? What's the fear?

9. What dreams am I having about the material presented? What issues are pulling at/out of your own biography? Have you over- or underplayed them?

10. To what extent has my analysis offered an alternative to the "commonsense" or dominant discourse? What challenges might very different audiences pose to the analysis presented?

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None of the above questions is intended to stifle scholarly license or to insist that there is one "right way" to answer them. Rather, these questions are intended to expand our work by helping us to recognize the potential influence of our writings: the pulls, fantasies, projections, and likely responses of very different kinds of audiences and the responsibility we have, therefore, to anticipate the relation between the texts we produce and the "common sense" that awaits/confronts them. By asking ourselves these questions, we push the issues, forcing ourselves to deal with what are serious dilemmas in our research. We repeat: not all of us will answer in the same ways. But we will clarify why we answer in the ways we do.

On Cautions

After reflections, we suggest that particularly those of us who write on questions of structural relations to the micropolitics of life in poverty should draft and publish a "Legend of Cautions: Ways to Misread, Misappropriate, and Misuse Presented Analyses." That is, we imagine such a legend that warns readers how not to read our work—for example, how not to use evidence of welfare fraud to cut payments or resurrect a welfare surveillance system, how not to exploit the real fears inside poor communities to generate support for the building of more prisons, how not to appropriate the anger of poor communities at their public schools as a rallying cry for vouchers likely to serve few but the relatively privileged. We recommend many, many drafts of these warnings, but anticipate that without such

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warnings the likelihood of our analyses being misappropriated is much higher than the likelihood of our analyses being deployed for ends of which we would approve.

On Educating Students in Multiple Genres/Texts/Media

We exit this chapter with our fiercest injunction: that we have an ethical responsibility to retreat from the stance of dispassion all too prevalent in the academy and to educate our students toward analyzing, writing, and publishing in multiple genres at one and the same time—in policy talk, in the voices of empiricism, through the murky swamps of self-reflective “writing-stories,” and in the more accessible languages of pamphlets, fliers, and community booklets. That is, if we are serious about enabling our students to be fluent across methods, to be engaged with community struggles, and to theorize conditions of social (in)justice, we must recognize that flickers and movements for social change happen in varied sites—courtrooms, legislative offices, the media, community-based organizations, and church groups, as well as the academy—and therefore through varied texts.

We recognize full well that there may be consequences for nontenured faculty who attempt to write across audiences in the way we are suggesting. Tenure review committees and external reviewers associated with these committees may not “count” writing other than traditional research (including qualitative analyses) as evidence that an individual is deserving of tenure or later promotion to full professor. It is important for junior faculty to establish credibility within a traditional research community. As one writes for a scholarly audience, however, it is possible to exercise simultaneously the option for writing in multiple tongues. We are not urging graduate students and junior faculty to write for broad-based audiences at the expense of writing for scholarly journals, authoring monographs, and so forth. Although the academy is changing, we recognize that the moves are slow, and resistance is always high.

With this caveat in mind, reflections on our responsibilities as social researchers must punctuate all texts we produce. Without such reflection, in the name of neutrality or researcher dispassion, we collude in a retreat from social responsibility, and the academy remains yet another institution without a soul in a world increasingly bankrupt of moral authority.

■ Note

1. Legal scholar Patricia Williams (1997) tells a story of her preschool-age son, who was seemingly unable to identify the colors of objects. Asked what color the grass was, for example, he would respond, “I don’t know” or “It makes no difference.” Eventually, Williams discovered that “the well-meaning teachers at his predominantly white school had valiantly and repeatedly assured their charges that color makes no difference. . . . Yet upon further investigation, the very reason that the teachers had felt it necessary to impart this lesson in the first place was that it did matter, and in predictably cruel ways: some of the children had been fighting about whether black people could play ‘good guys’ ” (p. 3).

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