

# Voices

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## The Politics of Regulation: Adolescent Mothers and the Social Context of Resiliency

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**Abstract:** *The experiences of adolescent mothers have too often been reduced to patterns of correlation linking teenage parenthood with low educational attainment, persistent poverty and continued welfare dependency. These analyses have reinforced representations of an “undeserving poor” and the tendency to “blame the victim” for her structural condition and her dependence on the state. Researchers in adolescent development have attempted to move beyond pathologizing frameworks by considering the “resiliency” of young mothers; yet their contributions have been limited by the tendency to reduce experience to the level of psychological coping mechanisms. In this article, I build upon more recent work as I explore the multifaceted ways in which resiliency can be interpreted. Drawing from the experiences of adolescent mothers within the care of the child welfare system, I illustrate empirically that resiliency is not an intrinsic, psychological characteristic but rather, shifts in relation to particular social contexts and policies.*

**Key Words:** *adolescent mothers, resiliency, child welfare*

Anisa, a 19-year-old, African American mother of two daughters, ages 5 and 4 had for the past three years, lived with her children in a Supervised Independent Living (SIL) program. Both of Anisa's parents were substance abusers and their inability to support Anisa and her two young children brought her to the attention of the child welfare system. The SIL program is run by a private nonprofit agency in a large Northeastern city, which is contracted and funded by the city's child welfare agency—Children and Youth Services (CYS). The SIL program is purportedly designed to ease and

support the transition of young mothers out of the child welfare system and into adulthood. The program objectives are aligned with expectations around education, employment, parenting and “self-sufficiency” indicated by city, state and federal regulators. Yet, the priorities of multiple public and private providers can at times be in conflict with a young mother's own vision for herself. Anisa speaks to how the personal autonomy of young mothers, who live in the child welfare system, can be challenged in multiple ways by the workers who serve as gatekeepers to their care. She perceives her Children and Youth Services (CYS) social worker's disregard for her own needs and desires as compromising her independence and the attainment of her personal goals. Essentially, she ponders whether her worker's “doubt” regarding her choices constructs her perception of “low self-esteem”.

This article is drawn from an ethnographic study of how mothers negotiate the regulations of multiple public and private providers in an urban child welfare system in order to meet their needs and those of their children. The young mothers are between the ages of 16 and 21 and they are predominately African American; many have experienced poverty, homelessness, and repercussions of their parents' drug addiction and/or incarceration. Each SIL resident lives with her child(ren) in an agency-leased apartment located in a privately-managed apartment building. At the time of this study, SIL leased 50 apartments at three primary sites, all located in high poverty, predominately African American urban neighborhoods. CYS refers young mothers to SIL who are either adjudicated dependent or delinquent. Adjudicated dependent youth are court-ordered into the custody of CYS as a repercussion of having been abused or neglected. Adjudicated delinquent youth enter custody as a result of their own

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## FROM THE EDITOR...

*Susan B. Hyatt, Indiana University Indianapolis  
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It is no small embarrassment to me that this issue of *VOICES* is being published at least a year later than I had anticipated. Life circumstances and complications in the production of this issue contributed to these delays. I apologize to all of our members and to our contributors who have been waiting for this publication to be completed, and thank you for your continued support. I hope you will agree that, thanks to the excellent collection of articles that form the core of this issue, it was well worth waiting for.

The articles in this issue of *VOICES* were all initially presented at a 2005 session at the American Anthropological Association entitled, "Girls Rule! Social Production and Agency among Low-Income Adolescents." The session was co-organized by Dana-Ain Davis (Queens College) and me, and it consisted of the four papers that appear here and a fifth authored by Mary Anglin, which will appear in the journal *Transforming Anthropology*.

These articles are intended to counter the presentations in much of the scholarly literature on adolescent girls, girls of color in particular, which has tended to portray this population as problematic, focusing on such themes as teenage pregnancy, sexually-transmitted diseases, substance abuse, gangs and violence. The contributors to this issue of *VOICES* create an alternative vision of low-income adolescent girls, one that documents their participation in a range of familial and communal activities.

Other features in this issue of *VOICES* will up-date our members and prospective members on the many exciting initiatives currently underway in this vibrant section. In her comments, for example, our previous president, Florence Babb, describes our on-going effort to create an archival history of the AFA as we celebrate our 20th anniversary year. We encourage everyone who may have AFA-related documents languishing in your offices and basements to get these materials to Florence as soon as possible! Our history is an invaluable resource for new generations of feminist scholars and we hope to make it available at some point through a digital portal. Be sure to read about the winners of this year's Zora Neale Hurston Travel Award competition and the Sylvia Forman paper award. Consult our web page (<http://sscl.berkeley.edu/~afaweb/>) for information on how to apply for 2008. If you are a student, by all means, do submit your work for consideration! If you are a faculty member, please encourage your students to apply.

This issue marks the beginning of our decision to publish *VOICES* as an electronic publication only. The prohibitive costs of printing and postage led us to this decision following

the publication of our 2005 issue. Right now, new issues of *VOICES* will not appear as part of AnthroSource but they can be downloaded and printed free of charge on our AFA web site.

This issue marks my third and last as editor of *VOICES*. We are anticipating producing another issue in Fall 2008, to be guest co-edited by Lea McChesney and Judi Singleton, focusing on the critical topic of "Anthropological Perspectives on Sexual Violence and Bodily Health." As a section, we are always evaluating our endeavors, including *VOICES*, and are always looking for new people with good ideas and energy to carry them forward. Please become involved with AFA if you are not already. Our annual business meetings at the AAA are usually lively and participatory events. They are an opportunity to get to know our current officers and board members and to offer your talents, interests and abilities.

It has been my honor to serve AFA as editor of *VOICES*. I look forward to staying involved with this section and to helping assure that our publications program and many other activities move forward. On behalf of all of us, we thank Florence Babb for her two years of leadership and welcome our new president, Cheryl Rodriguez and our President-Elect, Dorothy Hodgson. With this kind of leadership, we look forward to another 20 years of pioneering scholarly work and activism on behalf of feminist anthropology. Happy 20th Anniversary AFA!

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## FROM OUR PREVIOUS PRESIDENT...

*Florence E. Babb, University of Florida (fbabb@wst.ufl.edu)*

This issue of *Voices* will arrive online soon after I step down from my two-year term as president of AFA. I'm very pleased to share space here with those who are now stepping up, Cheryl Rodriguez and Dorothy Hodgson. What a great line-up for our future!

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Association for Feminist Anthropology. For the first time, and to honor this history, *Anthropology News* ran a series on the impact of feminism in our discipline. I hope you read and enjoyed the lively commentaries in that series, "Engendering Anthropology," last spring and fall. As guest editor, I worked with contributors who discussed feminism's place in the four subfields of anthropology and who also addressed some of the significant ways that feminist anthropology comes together with other anthropologies—African American, Latina/o, queer, and masculinity studies, to name a few. All were asked to assess the impact of feminist thinking and politics over the last couple of decades in their areas of expertise. The result was a productive dialogue. A Presidential panel and AFA Invited panel at the 2007 AAA enabled us to continue the provocative conversation.

The clever T-shirts we designed and used for fundraising at the 2006 and 2007 AAAs—reading "This is what a feminist anthropologist looks like"—turned out to be emblematic of the inclusive and far-reaching feminist anthropology we are striving for at this point in our history. I'm delighted to have been on board at a time when we can be justifiably pleased, though not complacent, about the broad scholarly and engaged work that our members and allies are undertaking in our research, writing, and everyday practice.

During several years as an AFA officer, I've been fortunate to work with an outstanding Board. I want to thank all the members and to say a special word of thanks to Sue Hyatt, *Voices* editor for her excellent work these last few years. In years to come, I hope that AFA as a section of AAA will become even more involved in developing strong ties to sister sections of our organization, and to counterpart sections of related disciplines. We can't afford to let up the passionate commitment that helped found AFA twenty years ago.

On a final note, AFA is in the process of cataloguing accumulated material of the association from our first two decades. I'm happy to be overseeing this archival project here in Gainesville, where feminist anthropologist-turned-librarian Traci Yoder is making steady progress and finding fascinating traces of our beginnings as a section of the AAA. Any of you who have old files packed away in your spare room are invited to make a contribution!

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*Florence E. Babb was AFA President 2005-2007 and is the Vada Allen Yeomans Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Florida.*

## FROM OUR NEW PRESIDENT...

*Cheryl Rodriguez, University of South Florida (crodrigu@chuma1.cas.usf.edu)*

In the introduction to the co-edited volume, *Women Writing Culture*, by Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, Behar writes, "When women look out for one another, the sea of eyes on our backs is no longer anything to fear" (p.2). When we read this sentiment in the context of feminism, it is both a strong directive and a source of encouragement. The directive is that being a feminist means assuming a political stance that moves beyond gender awareness. When *feminists* look out for each other, we are engaged in a global watch that penetrates racial, ethnic, class and gender boundaries. We are considering all the issues that intersect to define the human experience but we are particularly concerned about the intersection of gender with issues such as violence, economics, leadership and health. When feminists look out for each other, we're thinking about how we can continue to build upon feminist traditions of self-determination.

To take this idea a step further, when feminist anthropologists look out for each other we are thinking about how we can contribute to the intellectual growth and the social consciousness of other feminists thinkers. This, I believe is one of the major goals of the Association for Feminist Anthropology. As we encourage feminist scholarship and promote feminist voices in the discipline, we are also serving as a very unique source of feminist leadership within the AAA. We're promoting the necessity and the value of feminist perspectives. When I read the brilliant and creative essays submitted for the Sylvia Forman prize, I am very impressed with the sophisticated research ideas developed by undergraduate and graduate students whose anthropological questions are grounded in feminist theory. I am very proud that the AFA supports and promotes feminist anthropology by providing this venue for students. It is just one of many ways that we as feminists are looking out for each other.

Over the last two years I have served the AFA as president-elect and I have enjoyed every minute of the job. As I prepare myself to assume the responsibilities of president, I am so grateful to Florence Babb who has been an excellent role model. While it is quite challenging to assume leadership positions even as we meet all the professional obligations of our "day jobs", I still look forward to serving as AFA president and working with my colleagues from around the country to make sure that feminist anthropology will thrive.

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*Cheryl Rodriguez is Associate Professor of Africana Studies and Anthropology and Director of the Institute on Black Life at the University of South Florida*

## FROM OUR PRESIDENT ELECT...

*Dorothy Hodgson, Rutgers University  
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I am thrilled to have been elected President of AFA for 2009-2011. As a long-time member of the AFA, I am committed to ensuring that AFA retains and strengthens its vitality and vision. In my two years as a member of the AFA Executive Board and two years as Program Co-Chair, I have participated in board meetings, debates and decisions, and would like to facilitate these continuing conversations as President. I am committed to a broad definition of "feminist," an open and inclusive membership, and continuing efforts to link our resources and ideas with those of other AAA sections such as SOLGA, ABA and SUNTA, who share our vision of a progressive, politically engaged anthropology.

Although much might change before I take over as President in two years, I believe that AFA is at a critical juncture where we could benefit from some thoughtful strategic planning to reflect on our past and plan for our future. Key questions for me include:

1) *How do we tap into and support the research, teaching, and political interests of our members in all the sub-disciplines of anthropology?* The AFA membership has historically been dominated by social and cultural anthropologists, yet there are many feminists in the other sub-disciplines. This disparity is both a political issue about representation and accountability as a section of the AAA, and an intellectual challenge to the future of anthropology, especially feminist anthropology. In 2006 I organized an AFA invited roundtable on "Gendered Agency" that included feminist anthropologists from all of the sub-disciplines (Sue Gal, Sabrina Agarwal, Rosemary Joyce, and me). After brief presentations of our perspectives and insights on gendered agency from our research and sub-discipline, we had a fascinating discussion and debate with members of the audience. The experience confirmed my commitment as AFA President to ensure that we reach out to and include feminists from the entire field as members, program chairs, board members, and officers.

2) *As feminists, how do we navigate the dynamics of theory and practice, of academics and activism?* There is, of course, no one answer for this question, but I think it is useful for us as a feminist organization to constantly reflect on the range of possible answers. As a feminist who has worked in Africa for over twenty years, I am all too aware of how even the term "feminist" is debated, challenged, critiqued, and sometimes dismissed by women and men who nonetheless advocate for social justice, gender equity, and other progressive agendas that self-identified feminists support. In a special issue of WSQ [formerly Women's Studies Quarterly] on Activisms that I recently co-edited with my friend and colleague Ethel Brooks, we explored the blurry and some-

times contradictory boundaries among academics, advocacy and activism. One of our objectives was to promote conversations about the problematics of knowledge production among activists and academics, where the process of knowledge production differs, as do sources of knowledge, ways of reflecting, thinking and writing. I think that this question and related ones are very significant for AFA members to reflect upon.

3) *How can we learn from younger generations of feminist anthropologists, and ensure that their voice and vision are reflected in the activities and agendas of AFA?* At a time when many of our students no longer identify as "feminist," how do we, as a feminist-identified and inspired organization, attract younger members? How do we reconcile their sometimes quite different views of feminism and anthropology with those of older generations of feminist scholars? How do we encourage a diversity of membership so that young feminists of all stripes feel welcome in our organization?

I look forward to discussing these and other questions as we consider the future of AFA during my term as President.

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*Dorothy Hodgson is Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Institute for Research on Women at Rutgers University.*

### MEET OUR 2008-09 AFA OFFICERS

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# Good Citizens vs. Good Workers: Low-Income Girls and Clashing Subjectivities in a Charter School

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**Abstract:** *The public school system has continued to promote inequalities along axes of class, race and gender. Yet contestation over the role and purpose of public schooling has yielded significant social protest as well as reforms that are unfolding in often contradictory and complex ways. One set of conflicting aims characterizing current education reform is clashing definitions of the “good” citizen versus “good worker.” While neoliberal tenets posit “good” citizens and workers as those who exercise responsible “individual” choices, education reform enabling the adoption of radical pedagogies stresses a model of citizenship calling for individual and collective critical awareness and activism while still trying to prepare students to access further educational and employment opportunities as “good” workers. I explore how low-income, female, predominantly African-American high-school students who attend a charter school incorporating a radical education pedagogy interpret, internalize, and contest these competing definitions of good citizens versus good workers.*

**Keywords:** *adolescence, agency, education*

## Introduction

The floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina washed up far more than debris and destruction of human life and property. The seemingly intractable deprivation, neglect and discrimination along axes of race and class garnered national and international headlines, an occurrence Cornel West states happens every 30 to 40 years.

Despite horrific reports of rapes, beatings and murders of young girls and women, gender remained largely ignored. This phenomenon continues on a national scale with few exceptions. Yet, gender-based norms and economic, social and political discrimination continue to be highly complex, fluid and problematic realities, especially when intersecting with race and class.

## Background

My research, which focuses on urban anthropology and anthropology of education in a Philadelphia charter high school, foregrounds the critical role of gender as a flashpoint, or point of intersection, where race and class converge in highly-charged ways in the realms of formal schooling, social processes, and gender norming of largely African-American, low-income adolescent girls. My analysis

examines the ways in which school staff and students both reproduce and resist the imposition of mainstream gender norms in highly complex, contradictory ways. Situating my research in cultural reproduction theories is critical in order to understand multiple factors involved in the distribution and legitimation of dominant ideologies, discourses, meanings and practices. Additionally, framing my research in terms of cultural resistance theories enables me to identify contradictions within these systems and the key role played by human agents as they make sense of, integrate and challenge hegemonic subject-making (Quadagno and Fobes 1995; Fine 1993; Friend 1993; McCarthy 1993).

Conducting research at a charter school community has illuminated the often contradictory and multi-faceted constructions of low-income teenage girls because of these schools' underlying neoliberal assumptions regarding innovation and improved performance as a result of individual choice and competition. They are hybrid public schools, characterized by elements found in both public and private schools (Berman 1998; Fuller 2000; Sarason 1998). On the one hand, charter schools exercise more autonomy from state and local regulations in the areas of staff hiring and firing (especially with exemption from union membership), student selection, discipline policies, and pedagogy in curricula and instruction. On the other hand, these schools rely primarily on public funds that follow each student who chooses to attend a charter, and they also fall under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates to demonstrate improvement in student achievement through standardized test scores, attendance and graduation rates, and special services. The number of charter schools has grown steadily since the movement's inception in 1992 at a rate of about 250 new charters per year. Currently, about 3400 charter schools serve approximately one million students, a 34% increase from 10 years ago (Cecelia Rouse Temple U. Talk, Oct. 2005).

I have conducted intensive ethnographic research and analysis in a six-year old, 8-12 grade charter high school that espouses a radical educational philosophy coupled with a non-violent school climate. The Che Guevara Charter School (CGCS), during its third year of operation in school year (SY) 2001-2002, shifted its focus to become formally designated as a college preparatory school. This added label, along with the school's imposition of mainstream race-, class-, and gender-based norms on a 96% African-American, working-class and low-income student body, has yielded the greatest contradictions in constructions of girls as good citizens versus good workers.

Formal education embodies inequalities along axes of race, class and gender. Studies specifically pertaining to gender articulate a three-tiered process of gender socialization in which school curricula and social practices play a key part. Intensive ethnographic analysis, especially at the classroom and school-wide levels, illustrates the fluid, negotiated, and complex nature of the cultural reproduction of gender:

Schools and classrooms are dynamic and constantly evolving environments and teachers, in this context, are in a powerful position to guide and shape the culture of the classroom...Feminist researchers have suggested ways in which schools transmit messages about what counts as appropriate behaviour for girls to engage in.

(Gaine and George 1999: 82)

The school's mission statement articulates the tenets that generate core conflicts among staff, students and families around issues of cultural reproduction:

The mission of the Che Guevara Charter School\* is to provide a college preparatory learning environment with a focus on the individual avenues of problem solving, freedom, and critical thinking, and the collective values of nonviolence, safety, community and teamwork.

Handbook for Parents and Students (2005-06, pg. 6)

### **Girls as Good Citizens**

Since CGCS's inception in SY 1999-2000, it has stressed the objective to foster critically thinking, politically engaged, and non-violent individuals. The strategies to attain this ideal have changed drastically since my preliminary fieldwork as a teacher in the school's first summer school program in 2001.

The key areas where female students encounter this subject-making are in:

- Classroom instruction and pedagogy
- Curriculum, especially that of social studies, government and history courses
- Extra-curricular activities comprised mainly of pep squad, girls' volleyball, a slew of clubs and student government

All of these domains demonstrate significant overlap in constructions of adolescent girls as critical, empowered citizens. They all display, to varying degrees, one of the school's major tenets of facilitating and nurturing the development of what staff refers to as "student voice."

Most notable is teachers', administrators' and parents' encouragement of girls contributing in classroom discussions, on student governing bodies, and in active participation in extra-curricular activities. Yet, these same groups frequently

articulate concern and disparagement of girls whom they perceive as being too aggressively outspoken, or who display too much "attitude." This critique stems not only from white, middle-class, female norms of behavior, but also from ideals of black, female and middle-class notions of "lady-like" interaction and presentation styles.

Such impositions are most evident in girls' sports teams and the pep squad. On the one hand, these realms provide more open-ended, consensus-based and collaborative group dynamics for the participants. For example, the volleyball and pep squad coach explained, during numerous practice sessions, that she felt the need for the girls to have a safe space to blow off steam and to exercise both teamwork and leadership skills. On the other hand, she, along with the subsequent pep squad coach, articulated how difficult groups of girls can be to work with due to their cattiness and bickering, or "attitude." Both coaches were of African ancestry (Haitian and Dominican, and African-American, respectively). In fact, the African-American pep squad coach, who comes from a similar class background as the students, explicitly identified the need to add a "charm school" component to counteract the girls' attitudes, which she derided as stemming from a lower-class orientation the girls acquired in their neighborhoods. Moreover, this coach adopted a much more autocratic interaction style with the pep squad members.

Extensive classroom observations also yielded critical insights. Teachers did not privilege one gender over another in calling for volunteers and dispensing praise. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of female students became excited when correctly answering questions or problems, and self-identified as "smart" and as "geniuses."

A notable example where a girl's assertiveness in classroom discussions was problematized as overly aggressive did not stem from behavioral issues. The student was very engaged, yet dominated the discussion and challenged the World History teacher to more critically examine race, which was a theme that she and other students in the class revisited throughout the quarter. She extended her critique to what the teacher perceived as a personal attack on his objectivity and ability to facilitate discussions. This same student, whom one teacher said she "hated," was "disinvited" from returning to the school the following year due to her "attitude," characterized as antagonistic and belligerent by the predominantly white, middle-class staff.

These examples demonstrate the importance of in-depth research "within the black box" of schools as distinct, contradictory, and complex cultural systems (Apple 1996). The CGCS clearly sets parameters that both facilitate and constrain more open-ended gender-, race-, and class-based notions of "good citizens."

## Girls as Good Workers

The most intensive areas of change and contention among students, staff and parents revolve around the school's designation as college preparatory and non-violent. Moreover, these realms, which promote more explicit and extreme constructions of girls as good workers, alternately clash and converge with constructions of girls as good citizens. The specific domains that promote these practices are as follows:

- The internship program
- College counseling and higher-education opportunities
- The Code of Conduct re: discipline and tardiness (with specific issues with scheduling)
- The Dress Code

The school's most comprehensive efforts to inculcate what it considers key values to become productive workers occur through the internship program and the Code of Conduct, especially regarding the implementation of confusing schedules during the spring and fall of 2004.

First, the Code of Conduct wields more influence because it applies to all 400 8<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Two of the primary areas of policing are tardiness, which results in detentions and can lead to suspension, and the dress code. The Dean of Students, who is the creator and enforcer of the code, came to CGCS from an alternative high school serving juvenile offenders. Consequently, he characterizes the charter school students using criminalistic language such as "repeat offenders", and articulates the need to enact uncompromising penalties for tardiness although students, parents and staff expressed confusion over the schools' implementation of two intricate and alternating schedules. He cites his reason as being that students "will be fired" if they show up late for a job. This attitude extends to encompass repercussions for behavior perceived as violating the non-violence policy, which is a rather euphemistic term for a zero-tolerance policy. Female students are reprimanded most often for being late or disrespectful toward another community member, both of which result in detention.

The dress code and corresponding scrutiny of girls' sexuality is the most common expression of imposing race- and class-based norms on adolescent girls. Research on gender norming of girls in schools and in job training programs confirms the intensive sexual policing of girls in general, and the underlying assumptions that characterize ethnic minority, and/or poor women and girls as culturally deficient in the ways of proper, acceptable womanhood (Gaine and George 1999; Quadagno and Fobes 1995). Staff, parents and students most often agreed on the problematic nature of girls' oversexualized dress. They often go into detailed descriptions of infractions of the dress code, and sometimes extend their criticism to include speculation on girls' sexual activities. One of the school's hallmark policies of not requiring uniforms (unlike Philadelphia non-charter

public schools) is a hotly debated issue each year. Moreover, the all-male disciplinary staff feels more comfortable addressing dress code issues with boys than girls.

The internship program requires 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders to intern with a teacher. Students and teachers work out schedules and responsibilities, which range from photocopying to grading homework, tests and quizzes. Students keep track of their hours on an internship log and take a course on work-place skills such as resume writing, and professional dress and conduct. Additionally, numerous teachers talk about "firing" their interns or extol the virtues of exemplary interns.

Finally, female students excel the most in the areas of graduation rates, college attendance, and academic and attendance awards. Out of the school's two graduating classes to date, the majority of college attendees, and scholarship and award recipients were female. This culmination represents the school's primary goal, and underlines the shift from promoting a critical notion of citizenship to a broader and more mainstream notion of productive, successful, and upwardly mobile individuals.

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## *The Politics of Regulation (cont. from page 1)*

delinquent activity, which brings them to the attention of the Juvenile Justice System and Children and Youth Services.

The broad literature on adolescent motherhood indicates that youth who have children during adolescence are also more likely to remain in poverty, have low educational attainment, be underemployed and use public assistance and their children are more susceptible to ongoing health challenges and poverty (Stephens et al., 2003; Brindis & Philliber, 2003; Coren et al., 2002; Kisker et al., 1998; Long & Bos, 1998; Mauldon, 1998; Aber et al., 1995). Yet, research to date has not adequately considered what might underlie these poor outcomes. It is imperative we understand why service provision is failing. This study raises important questions concerning whether the “failure” of these services can be explained, not as many have argued, in terms of the choices of the mothers, but rather, in the nature of policies guiding program development and shaping the context in which service provision occurs (Luttrell, 2003; Nathanson, 1991).

In this article, I explore both conceptually and empirically the notion of resiliency because measures of it have been used to guide practices for both educational and social service programs (see Luther & Cicchetti, 2000). As Debold et al. (1999) contend, resilient individuals are those who “adapt in the direction of societal approval in the face of . . . risk factors” (pg. 184). Furthermore, identifying “odds-defying” children has been core to the construct of resilience. This concept is problematic because if analysis of program success is focused upon individual responses, the institutional inequities that maintain oppression, based upon race, class, gender, and location, remain hidden.

Kingfisher (2002) notes that welfare restructuring involves cutbacks in social benefits, yet increased bureaucratization and surveillance. Furthermore, this change is marked by contracting to private agencies, such as the one responsible for SIL, for provision of “improvement” services to clients and their families. The growth of public-private hybrids in the urban welfare sector represents a turn to the market to foster competition, innovation and improvement in services and client outcomes (van den Berg, 2004; Dibben and Higgens, 2004).

However, implications of a decentralized, yet hierarchical, hybrid government appear to complicate communication patterns and delay service provision. Also, decisions concerning which provider is responsible for administering which resources are commonly blurred in a climate of tight budgeting. As an administrator at CYS noted, “a lot of mandates are not sufficiently funded,” leaving scarce resources to fully support youth in meeting enforced performance outcomes. Unclear organizational structure makes it difficult for a young mother to assert control in holding any particular manager accountable for not meeting stated objectives and

responsibilities concerning her care. As Baker (2004) contends, “the very fragmented nature of the interorganizational networks that are arising to deliver services obscures who is accountable to whom for what” (pg. 47). Furthermore, since clients are not entrusted to secure resources and services on their own, they must rely on the favor of providers at various levels of the hierarchy. Given this service context, there are very few participants, who are able to meet the unrealistic and often contradictory expectations, established by multiple public and private providers. I suggest that the misconception of resilience as an individual trait and psychological coping strategy, devoid of social and cultural context, promotes a deficit understanding of the vast majority of young mothers.

For example, mothers are expected to attend school and parenting classes, clean their apartments, and keep their children happy and healthy, among other requirements. Far too often, expectations are unattainable given that guiding regulations do not also provide the social and economic supports necessary for mothers to meet expectations. In order to provide for themselves and their children financially, many moms work, as weekly checks from their SIL agency (\$62/week for mother and child) are insufficient. Furthermore, some state dependent moms and most delinquent moms are not provided with daycare; yet, they are required to attend an educational program.

Understanding resilience as an individual trait turns a blind eye to inequalities perpetuated through urban institutions. Weseen notes, “the push to discover what makes some children able to swim rather than sink in the turbulent waters of racism and poverty threatens to obscure the dynamics of social and economic injustice” (pg. 185, quoted in Debold et al., 1999). As the gaze of judgment is cast upon individual clients, programs are justified in the successful resilience of the few while larger inequalities are ignored. Some researchers have argued for elimination of the construct of resiliency, due to its tendency to be misconstrued. However, I suggest that because of its appeal and usage by both the popular press and practitioners (see Luther & Cicchetti, 2000), it is imperative that researchers continue to better define this term and communicate how resiliency is both multifaceted and a socio-culturally mediated process.

Spencer (2001, 2003, 2006) contests the notion that resiliency is a static and uni-dimensional quality of the individual but rather, she and others (see i.e., Rutter, 1993; Debold et al., 1999; Luther & Cicchetti, 2000) argue that it changes developmentally across time and can be located in the relational and environmental contexts in which individual selves emerge. While authors communicate this socially mediated understanding of resilience, little empirical research has documented the ways in which it takes shape (Olsen et al., 2003). If resiliency can be fostered or hindered in both the social relations between service providers and young mothers and in the ways regulatory discourse is communicat-

ed, then we can understand constructs of success and failure as being systematically mediated. Hence, if we understand resilience as shifting across contexts, then we can interpret, from the perspectives of participants, which relationships and policies are “resilient” given particular social environments. This anthropological insight can be used to guide program development to better promote resiliency across nested levels of policies, programs, caseworkers and individual mothers.

In the remainder of this article, I explore empirically how this broader concept of resilience provides a useful lens for interpreting adolescent mothers’ experiences of service provision in a child welfare system. I explore how resiliency can be hindered by inconsistent regulation by multiple public and private providers, which require school attendance but do not necessarily provide funding for childcare. I also consider how workers as mediators can enhance or disable resilience among clients.

One day, I had lunch with two SIL supervisors, Beth and Jane. As we waited for our lunch to be served, Beth spurred an animated conversation when she remarked the child welfare system is really messed up. Beth, a White middle-aged woman, had worked for the SIL-providing agency for many years. Jane shared her insight that the system is biased based upon gender. Jane, a Black middle-aged woman, had only recently been hired by the agency as a SIL program supervisor. She explained she had worked with boys in the Juvenile Justice System for many years before providing residential care to adolescent mothers and that having children brings additional issues that do not get fully addressed by the system. Jane felt that a lack of concern is communicated for the young women and their children when childcare is not provided. Furthermore, she noted that depending upon which part of the system youth come from, whether they are placed through mental health, child welfare or juvenile justice, they are treated differently.

For example, while all moms are expected to be in school, delinquent moms are equivocally provided with daycare. This is in contrast to dependent moms whose childcare tends to be paid for through CYS directly upon admission to the SIL program. Delinquent moms, on the other hand, must go through several bureaucracies, first applying at the office for state subsidized childcare, which, due to their CYS status, they most likely will be denied. Once the application is processed and the denial letter is received, the mom’s SIL case manager provides the letter to her SIL supervisor, who then forwards it to the CYS worker who must substantiate the denial and only then, might childcare funding be provided through CYS.

Many moms and SIL case managers find this process cumbersome and nearly impossible to navigate successfully. This example points to the ways in which a decentralized, yet hierarchically organized public/private hybrid contributes to deferred and insufficient services and resources for mothers

and children. The complicated and multi-step pathway to securing childcare disadvantages delinquent mothers. Without daycare, delinquent moms often cannot feasibly attend an educational program. Furthermore, alternative forms of navigation establish a distinct disparity within the SIL program. Dependent mothers have easier access to childcare and, hence, are privileged relative to delinquent moms.

Even dependent moms referred directly through CYS obtain different services. Jane relayed a recent conversation with a CYS worker; this worker explained childcare was provided for all CYS dependent moms who were in high school but not for the young women who attended college. I saw evidence of this several months prior to our lunch conversation when CYS stopped paying for daycare after a mom graduated from high school and started nursing school. She was told to apply for state subsidized childcare. Yet, in order to be eligible, she was required to work 25 hours per week, which she found infeasible since she attended school full time and wanted to spend some quality time with her son.

The CYS childcare policy, which curtails services for young women once they enter higher education, not only limits their ability to progress educationally but also hinders their capacity to remove themselves and their children from poverty. Such a policy is discriminatory, as poor African American young moms are supported to reach only a limited level of development and not beyond. Furthermore, as a mom’s resiliency is measured by her success in school, a policy that does not provide daycare severely hinders her ability to even attend post-secondary education. Only if we understand resiliency as a process shaped through social relations and regulating policies can we fully comprehend the ways in which unjust childcare provision may actually facilitate this mom having to drop out of nursing school. If we perceive her resilience as simply an individual coping-strategy, we ignore problematic guiding policies.

Makia, an eighteen-year-old “delinquent” African American mother of a one-year-old son, was also greatly burdened by her inability to obtain childcare. Soon after entering the SIL program, Makia graduated from high school and was accepted to a University, which required a one-hour commute each way from her home. At the time of our interview, she had been attending the University for about a month and still did not have daycare. Makia told me the following about her situation:

*I think I've had a lot of help being in this program and I had a setback by not having any daycare... Now I got to leave my child with different people. Thinking about that while I'm at school, it's hard for me to concentrate. When my teacher gives a lecture, sometimes I find myself wandering and then that leaves me when I get home to have to do extra work because I really wasn't catching on. So I have to re-overlook my notes and ... I'm here trying to cook*

*for my son, trying to clean up, trying to study... I put him to sleep first, so I can really get some work done, and by the time I lay down it seems like it is time to wake up again... I was having a breakdown about two weeks ago, I was crying because I was just like, I can't do it.*

While Makia and her son are supported with a residency, her ability to fully meet personal goals is challenged by this same publicly funded care, which does not provide for her son's daycare. Makia's resiliency cannot only be located in her individual coping strategies but rather, it is shaped by the larger child welfare system and the workers who mediate her care.

For example, several SIL workers went to extraordinary measures to support Makia's ability to stay in school. On many occasions, her case manager arrived at work by 6 a.m. to watch her son. On other days, a SIL supervisor personally paid another mom to baby-sit. One morning, I visited Makia's case manager, Nel, while she watched Makia's son. With a sigh and a look of exasperation, Nel shared how after everything they had gone through applying for financial aid, she would do what she could to make sure Makia stayed in school; she was not going to let her fail. After being denied state subsidized childcare, Makia finally secured daycare from CYS through the help of several SIL staff members repeatedly advocating on her behalf.

Makia's ability to continue attending college was challenged by a policy that did not provide for her childcare; yet, fostered by the social network of SIL workers who offered support above and beyond their job requirements. Some may consider Makia an example of a highly resilient individual. Yet it is important to note that her personal strength alone did not allow her to remain in college. The extraordinary efforts of several individuals provided the support she needed to offset the absence of publicly funded childcare. Therefore, in order to understand Makia's resiliency, we must not only look at her remarkable ability to cope but also across multiple nested levels, at the relationships and institutional context that shaped her experience. In fact, Makia was recognized publicly for her resiliency as she received an award at the agency's annual community fundraising event. Makia was established in the public gaze as an exemplar, and placed in a position to give testimony to the success of the SIL program.

However, the underside of this story was not revealed to the public. Soon after the event, I learned that the daycare provision had come too late. Even though Makia was remarkably adept at accessing assistance from her social network, she still missed too many classes, as babysitters were not always available. She was unable to keep up with her course requirements and was forced to withdraw for the fall semester although she told me she planned to reenroll in the spring. Again, it is only when our analytical lens includes programmatic and institutional relationships can we fully

understand the ways in which resiliency is not only individually located but also constructed within a social system.

Teen moms who live under state care require assistance because they have limited economic and social resources. Many were abused and neglected and have lived their lives dealing with the consequences of being born into extreme urban poverty. Alarming, I frequently witnessed mothers encounter blame, negative stereotypes, and general disdain as they navigated service contexts and interacted with providers. Yet, I was struck by the resourceful, creative and self-efficacious ways in which mothers countered oppression within the bureaucracies. Unfortunately, I could provide additional examples of young mothers who either dropped out of school or were unable to attend in the first place because they did not receive comprehensive care. As social policies perpetuate institutionalized practices of oppression while hindering advanced educational attainment for poor minority mothers in care, most are unable to attain the full range of their goals and dreams.

In conclusion, I argue that more work must be done to demonstrate empirically how resiliency is mediated socio-culturally. It is only through a deeper understanding of multifaceted resiliency processes that this knowledge can then be used to better guide program development. Understanding the ways in which inequitable social systems construct notions of success and failure can alter the punitive ways in which individual clients are perceived. Only then, can policies and service provision better support adolescent mothers and their children.

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## Sylvia Forman Prize

### Congratulations 2007 Silvia Forman Award Winners

**Kate Goldade** (University of Arizona) "How can they throw me out when the baby is from here?": Reproduction, Citizenship, and Undocumented Nicaraguan Migrants in Costa Rica"  
– First Prize, Graduate

**Dawn Pankonien** (Northwestern University) "Single Mother Families Redux: Tourism Development and Gender Relations in Huatulco, Oaxaca, Mexico"  
– Honorable Mention, Graduate

**Fae Goodman** (University of Louisville) "Fishnets and Broken Bones: the Stylized Femininity of a Woman's Full-Contact Sport"  
– First prize, Undergraduate

**Jessica Gross** (Princeton University) "Gender Segregation in Vocational Activities at a Kampala, Uganda Primary School"  
– Honorable Mention, Undergraduate

AFA is pleased to invite graduate and undergraduate students to submit essays in feminist anthropology in competition for the Sylvia Forman Prize. The winners, one undergraduate and one graduate student, will receive a certificate, cash award (\$500 graduate and \$300 undergraduate) and have their essay summaries published in the *Anthropology Newsletter*. The prize is named for the late Sylvia Helen Forman, one of the founders of AFA, whose dedication to both her students and feminist principles contributed to the growth of feminist anthropology.

We encourage essays in all four subfields of anthropology. Essays may be based on research on a wide variety of topics including (but not limited to) feminist analysis of women's work, reproduction, sexuality, religion, language and expressive culture, family and kin relations, economic development, gender and material culture, gender and biology, women and development, globalization, and the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. Please check the AFA web page for details of the 2008 competition:

<http://sscl.berkeley.edu/~afaweb/forman.html>

# Through Their Eyes

## Child and Adolescent Agency in the Urban Environment

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**Abstract:** *There is an emerging approach in anthropology that investigates children and adolescents, not just as additions to adult-centered studies, but as active social actors who experience, react to, change, and create the worlds around them. In this paper, I report on research which utilized a child-centered focus to understand how children and youth in an inner-city Southern community understand their local environments. I examine children's perceptions and negotiations in both their urban physical and social landscapes using ethnographic methods. I document children's particular modes of thought and actions which help them move through the urban world within and beyond the confines of their families.*

**Keywords:** *child-centered ethnography, urban environments, child agency*

**“A whole bunch of kids running around the street. . . We have water fights on our street with all these people, [they] come down to the end that I stay on, and we just have water fights and then sometimes everybody just comes outside and plays”**

—Ruby 2003

The above quote is from a nine year old girl named Ruby\* who attended the Good Street Community Service's 2003 Summer Program located in an urban southern neighborhood called the Heights. I took the opportunity to interview Ruby several times while I simultaneously conducted my thesis research and worked in the Summer Camp. In this ethnographic project, I interviewed girls like Ruby about their neighborhoods in an effort to investigate how inner-city children and young adolescents perceive and negotiate their urban environment beyond adult worlds and perspectives.

Two bodies of research inform the intersection between children and the urban environment. First, in Anthropology, a body of literature has recently emerged that recognizes Ruby and other children as active social actors and not just small receptacles of adult knowledge. Researchers such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1998), Carolyn Sargent (1998), Lawrence Hirschfeld (2002), Allison James (1998), and Donna Lanclos (2003) all argue that no longer can children's actions and ideas be examined solely from adult perspectives or

left undocumented, but rather children must be asked about their physical and cultural environments. In other words, children and adolescents must become our key informants.

In particular, work highlighting young female children and adolescents has often neglected girls' voices, experiences, and concerns. According to Bonnie J. Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way (1996), girls' words, actions, and ideas are ignored in much scholarship. Researchers often speak for them in ways that perpetuate pervasive and destructive stereotypes, describing them as “school dropout[s], teenage welfare mother[s],” and victims of abuse (Leadbeater and Way 1996:5). Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (2000) assert that “we need to deepen our understandings of the many contexts that are meaningful to youth” (xi). Using girls' expressions and actions, what is meaningful for girls in the Heights begins to emerge.

The second body of work that informs this analysis is the numerous urban studies within anthropology and other disciplines that examine the affects of urbanism on children and youth. In this literature, a pattern has appeared that explains the urban world as a place of risk and terror for children. Ethnographers such as Jagna Sharff (1998) and Philippe Bourgois (1995) find inner-city life to be difficult for youth and families. Likewise, child developmentalist James Garbarino (1991) describes US inner-cities as “war zones” and explores how mothers and children struggle to survive in urban settings.

Although the urban environment is at times difficult and dangerous as Garbarino (1991) describes, I also found children in the midst of these “war zones” enjoying BBQ's, impromptu porch parties, games in the street, and bike riding. Like Jonathan Kozol (1996), I found that urban children do not always perceive their worlds as chaotic and fearful, but that urban communities hold both hardships and enjoyment.

In order to explore specifically how inner-city girls think about and move through their worlds, I utilized a variety of data-gathering techniques including a map-drawing exercise where children drew their neighborhood conceptualizations. I also gave six girls cameras to capture images they found important. I took neighborhood walks with children during which they pointed out where they played, who their neighbors were, and explained what they thought about their environment. Utilizing participant observation, I watched children during Summer Camp events and everyday activities in the Heights. I employed unstructured and semi-structured

\*All participants and the neighborhood in which this study took place are represented by pseudonyms.

interviews in an effort to ask children more direct questions about their community. During a three month research period, I interviewed fifteen girls ages 8 to 13 with six of these girls acting as my “key informants.” Their words and ideas are presented in this paper.

From the data, children’s concern for the physical and social environment emerged as key themes, as did their ability to make sense of and navigate their concerns in realistic, everyday ways. For example, abandoned houses litter almost every street in the Heights.



While on a neighborhood walk with Chakeeta, I counted ten abandoned houses on a street only three blocks long. Even on Ruby’s street where the majority of the homes are rehabilitated, abandoned buildings still stand. Many of the children involved in my study knew detailed histories and current activities of several derelict houses and recognized the real life events that went on in them. For example, Mary watched the people who squatted in the abandoned houses on her street. She talked about them in this way:

**Some people live in and sleep in the little abandoned houses because they might not have nowhere to stay. They sleep there and sometimes they might hang out there. (C: And what do they do when they hang out?) They have their friends come over and play cards.**

Chanise surveyed the abandoned houses around her and described them as: “Houses with holes in the side of them, cats and dogs go in them. The cats and dogs fight and keep me up at night.” Chakeeta exhibited detailed knowledge about a group of burned houses which she and her brother captured in this photo. In my field notes, I wrote:

**The houses had been burnt and Chakeeta, TaReek, and Little Bit knew who burned them. Three boys burned them. They said the boys put gasoline tanks inside and lit them. They didn’t know why the boys did it. They said it took the fire trucks awhile to get there. By that time the fire was so great that it took several trucks to put it out.**

Alisha also pointed out in an interview that the house next door was vacant because “a woman died in that house, got old.”

Although several children exhibited interest in and fear about the abandoned houses, they also recognized the need for change in their neighborhoods and talked about ways that change could happen, specifically in terms of these deserted structures. Alisha said that she would change the abandoned houses and make sure that “the houses would have enough space” because the homes “are too close together, about 5 inches apart.” She wanted to change the abandoned buildings in an effort to “make the street look better.”

Given the reality of the physical landscape, children translated their awareness of the environment into specific concrete boundaries for play. Within their neighborhoods, children designated certain areas for play, regardless of whether their guardian watched them during playtime or not. While some children lacked much supervision, they still adhered to boundaries located near their homes. For example, Aneesa went outside and played even while her mother slept, but she defined her play area as her side yard and sometimes at the liquor store next door. Ruby explained that she only played on one end of her street even though she had cousins on the opposite end because of safety reasons.



In this photo, she depicts the side of the street on which she plays. She did not usually walk on the other side because too many men hung around and that side of the street wasn’t “fun.” Hyacinth also created boundaries for her play, “We stay in our yard or in front of the street or we’ll just stay in front of our house, pretty much that’s all.” Likewise, Chakeeta played only around her house and in the vacant lot next door. She did not walk around or play in the first or third blocks of her street because she did not know her neighbors in these blocks. She ameliorated the limitations of these self-set boundaries by navigating her neighborhood with pathways located directly around her home.

The six girls that took pictures all captured their play areas on film.



In these pictures, Abrianna captured her backyard, her main play area, and the corner store which she frequents with her sister.



Chanise took pictures of her front yard and the open lot across the street where she and her sisters sometimes play.



However, as shown here, the majority of her pictures capture the inside of her home and the Good Street Summer Camp facilities because they feel safest playing inside.



Chakeeta's play area pictures are exclusively of the parking lot in front of her apartment building. In fact, her

pictures are all taken from the vantage point of the parking lot. Alisha took pictures of the houses directly across from her home and the open lot by the Good Street garden. Each girl, in her own way, captured their close-to-home play areas.

Chakeeta and Alisha give us insight into why they adhere to such boundaries. While Alisha gives a practical reason for boundary-making: “We ride bikes, play hide and seek, but not too far away because the seeker would never find you,” Chakeeta noted safety concerns, telling me that she plays close to her apartment building or walks around her neighborhood using well known footpaths that intersect parallel blocks. She doesn’t play on either end of her street because there are “young boys on the street” and she is unfamiliar with her neighbors.

While the boundaries children created limited their play areas, they did not limit their fun. Regardless of how big or small these spaces were, girls still played games and hung out with their friends. Hyacinth plays “basketball, kickball, [and] dodge ball” in her designated playground. When speaking about her front yard, she stated: “When we play games, we have fun.” Chanise’s neighborhood makes her happy because sometimes on Sundays, her neighbors would all come outside and play. Even though she usually plays inside, Chanise loved these Sundays. Mary limits her play area to her carport and front yard, but within this space she hula hoops and plays UNO. Although several of the children I spoke with designated specific areas as playgrounds, their opportunities for play within these spaces were not largely hampered. The only exception to this boundary-making pattern was bike riding. While riding a bike, children did not adhere to their designated spaces, but traveled to parts of the street that were not familiar because not only did they need extra space for riding, but they also felt freer to escape perceived threats.



The map exercise I conducted during one of the weekly art sessions of Summer Camp also gave me insight into how children perceive and negotiate their physical urban commu-

nities. During this activity, I asked children to draw a map of their neighborhoods. I gave no visual examples and asked that they only rely on their general knowledge of maps.



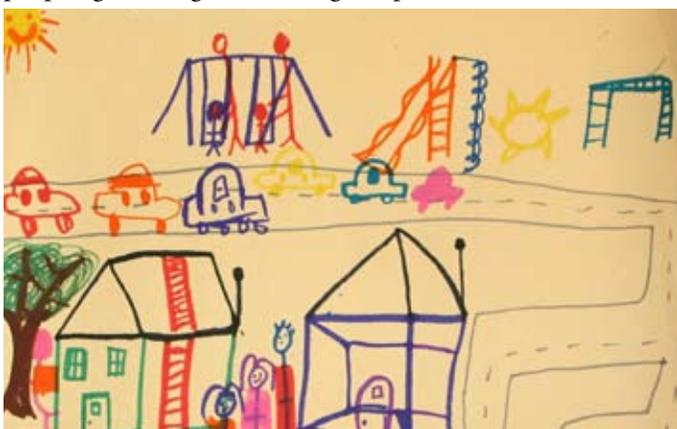
Almost 75% of the children’s maps had multiple houses drawn close together, as you can see in their drawings. Houses were located in clusters and streets separated groups of buildings. The houses of the Heights are often very close together with little yard space and the maps are very realistic in their depiction.



They present a topographical reality of urban life in the Heights, including numerous depictions of stop signs and/or stop lights, a key safety feature on the busy streets of the Heights.

Children were concerned not only with their physical environment, but their social environment as well. Children moved through their social terrain, judging their neighbors on the basis of being quiet or loud. Over and over again when I asked children to describe their neighbors, they distinguished the loud from the quiet and associated decibel level with other behaviors. For example, loudness was associated with shooting guns, popping fireworks, and revving engines at night, in addition to being mean, telling lies, fussing or arguing in public, and other negatively perceived behaviors. When I asked Alisha what she liked about her neighborhood, she replied: "It's not very good. People be shooting at night. I hear people give whoopin's and it sounds like it hurts. The trains are too loud, music's up too loud." Ruby explained: "the people over there drinking and stuff and all the time all they did was partying and stuff and they be loud, they be shooting."

On the other hand, quiet is associated with positive characteristics of both neighbors and neighborhoods and with peacefulness, calmness, fun, and security. Ruby likes her neighborhood because: "It's fun. Sometimes quiet." When I asked Hyacinth what she liked about her street, she replied: "It's quiet. It's not loud noises on our street." When I asked Seena: "If you could change something, what would you change?" She replied: "That I lived on the street by myself. There'd be peace and quiet." Children in the Heights live in urban neighborhoods where safety is a concern. The girls in this research perceive the threats to their safety, but negotiate those threats in ways that allow them to still have fun. Abrianna sums it up this way: "People be shooting, but the neighborhood is good. If people do bad things, they don't do it in front of the children. They don't do it outside their homes. [They] handle their business inside their home. They're good people, good neighborhood, good personalities around me."



Child agency theory espouses that children can act upon, not just react to, their environment. It also supposes that children create and recreate the worlds around them in particular ways. The inner-city girls who participated in my research live in a neighborhood with housing problems, rampant drug use, poor education, insufficient medical care, and city service neglect. But, as seen in the above examples,

these girls are far more aware and savvy in their environment than many would give them credit. They are not passive reactors to their urban community, but are acutely aware of their environment and make daily decisions on how to move through it to ensure their own safety, but to still be children, to have fun

The children and young adolescents who participated in my research told their stories in frank and colorful ways. The current realities of urban life in the Heights are detailed through their words and pictures. Their voices help to paint, as Leadbeater and Way (1996) assert, "a more accurate and more detailed picture of their experiences than current stereotypes and risk statistics offer" (9). The girls who participated in my study, like other children whose actions are at the forefront or background of urban ethnographies, have their own ways to think about and move through their neighborhoods (Kozol 1996, Sharff 1998, Bourgois 1995). Overall, stories like Chakeeta's, Alisha's and Ruby's should be told. They all have intuitive perspectives on the world and creative ways to navigate the buildings, streets, and people that make up the Heights. Their stories and their words are worth paying attention to.

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# The International Women's Anthropology Conference (IWAC)

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## A Brief Introduction

IWAC was started in 1974 as an outgrowth of the New York Women's Anthropology Caucus (NYWAC), a group of New York women anthropologists who gathered regularly to discuss their work and that of others from a feminist perspective. With IWAC, the focus shifted to the formation of an international network of women anthropologists – academic and non-academic – to extend its scope and to bring the work of women anthropologists into the global arena. At its height, IWAC had 500 members drawn around the world. IWAC members published a newsletter (1982-95), a number of monographs drawing on contributions from its international membership,<sup>1</sup> held meetings and conferences, including two Wenner-Gren conferences, and hosted panels at the AAA and IUAES attended by anthropologists from other countries. Several of its members were actively engaged in and around the United Nations, where they understood that anthropologists with a feminist perspective had a role to play and could make an important contribution to international policy.

In 1982 IWAC gained consultative status as an international Non-Governmental Organization with ECOSOC, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Such status is difficult to obtain and provides access to UN proceedings and conferences on the wide range of issues that constitute the subject of ECOSOC deliberations, for example, sustainable development, human rights, women's issues, etc. IWAC involvement and advocacy at the UN has included formal written and oral interventions at meetings, lobbying, participation in expert group meetings, organiza-

tion of side events. Its members participated in and organized panels around the International Decade for Women and submitted written and oral statements at the UN to influence outcome documents on a variety of issues.

Although IWAC continues to have consultative status, over the past decade – as an organization – it can best be described as semi dormant. The National Council for Research on Women (NCRW) hosts the network and does the administrative work necessary to maintain its status. A few members remain marginally involved with UN activities. Over this period important strides in the visibility of gender issues at the UN have been made. New civil society organizations and networks have emerged and new spaces for civil society engagement have opened. Nevertheless, there is clearly much work yet to be done.

The expansion of the internet and its organizing potential can today be used to disseminate information about how, when and where anthropologists can bring their expertise to bear on intergovernmental and civil society processes. This, therefore, is an opportune time to revive the network – at least in virtual form – to facilitate involvement in those international decision-making processes that civil society organizations are working so hard to influence.

The Association of Feminist Anthropologists could support an effort to revive IWAC by assisting with compilation of a mailing list for initial contact to be part of a listserv, active participation in the listserv with, for example, information about known meetings and possible sites of intervention. AFA's moral support is, of course, also important.

Further information on IWAC can be found at <http://homepages.nyu.edu/~crs2/index.html>

<sup>1</sup>Two books were published jointly by AFA and IWAC under the auspices of the AAA, *From Labrador to Samoa: The Theory and Practice of Eleanor B. Leacock* (1993) and *Feminism, Nationalism and Militarism* (1995)

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 Association for Feminist Anthropology

# Beyond Today and Pass Tomorrow: Self-Efficacy Among African-American Adolescent Mothers

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**Abstract:** *In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, African-American youth continue to be negatively defined by the media, by educators, and even some youth-focused organizations as either super-predators or super-breeders. Black teenage mothers, in particular, are held responsible for poverty, escalating school dropout rates, child abuse and neglect, welfare dependence, despair and crime. Despite the persistence of these negative portrayals, researchers who strive to understand the lives of African-American girls find that there are both subtle and overt forms of resistance to negative stereotyping as well as nuanced and creative strategies for self-definition. This paper describes a research project that allowed some brief glimpses into the lives of teenage mothers in two low-income communities. I discuss expressions of self-efficacy that emerged in interviews with these young women and the critical need for youth programs in low-income communities. I also include some programmatic suggestions that are specific to teen mothers and discuss the importance of feminist anthropology in research on community-based youth programs.*

**Key Words:** *Teenage mothers, self-efficacy, youth-focused programs, community research*

In a very small rural town in northern Louisiana, a young African-American woman takes the time to explain her distrust of reporters, researchers or anyone else who wants to ask her questions. She describes an experience with a newspaper reporter who made the 276 mile trip from New Orleans to her town to interview local residents about issues affecting the community. “He wasn’t interested in telling the truth. He just wanted to show the bad parts of this town,” she says. The 18 year old mother, student, daughter goes on to say:

When I read the newspaper article, I didn’t like what he said about me. He made it seem like I’m just some single mother out here in the country with no real goals. I really did not like the way he made me look. I felt foolish because I had let him interview me and then he wrote about me like I’m somebody on welfare. I work, I take care of my child, I have supportive parents and I plan to go to college (Rodriguez 2004).

This young woman was a participant in a federally funded project entitled the Youth Opportunity Movement or YO (Labor 2000). As one of several ethnographers investigating the impact of YO on low-income communities across the country, I interviewed several African-American youth—male and female—about the most pressing social and economic forces affecting their lives. Perhaps because I am an African-American woman whom she had seen observing various programs in her town over a period of days or perhaps because she was encouraged by the YO program administrators, she agreed to an interview with me and gradually became comfortable sharing perspectives on her life. As I listened to the young woman’s words, I recalled Joyce Ladner’s classic study of young Black women entitled, *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (1972). Ladner, a Black sociologist, conducted her ethnographic research in the 1960s. She was concerned not only with examining the complex and “multilayered texture” (Smith 1995) of the lives of girls in an urban Black community, but also with deconstructing and changing the ways in which social scientists study the lives of young Black women. In the introduction of this book Ladner wrote:

Placing Black people in the context of the deviant perspective has been possible because Blacks have not had the necessary power to resist labels. This power could have come only from the ability to provide the definitions of one’s past, present and future. Since Blacks have always, until recently, been defined by the majority group, that group’s characterization was the one that was predominant. (Ladner 1972)

In the 21st century, African-American youth continue to be negatively defined by the media, by educators, and even some youth-focused organizations as either super-predators or super-breeders. As Hendrixson argues, while super-predators threaten violence, Black teenage mothers are held responsible for poverty, escalating school dropout rates, child abuse and neglect, welfare dependence, despair and crime (Hendrixson 2002). Despite the persistence of these negative portrayals, researchers who strive to understand the lives of African-American girls find that there are both subtle and overt forms of resistance to negative stereotyping as well as nuanced and creative strategies for self-definition (Fordham 1993; Leadbeater 1996; Ward 1990). How do African-American girls shape definitions of their past, present and future in the post-Civil Rights twenty-first century? How do they advocate for themselves and express their aspirations amid historic, widely-accepted stereotypes

about Black women as matriarchs, mammies and other negative images? More importantly, how can researchers, educators and program coordinators of youth-focused organizations learn to recognize self-reliance and self-efficacy in young adolescent mothers and build upon these skills to create Black women leaders who will contribute to change in their communities? How can we make it easier for these young women to move productively beyond today and pass tomorrow?

The young woman's assessment of the New Orleans reporter is an indication of her connectedness to the validity of her life; she expresses a belief in herself that can only be heard by those willing to view her as a multi-dimensional person with diverse capabilities. Her sense of self, her refusal to be marginalized and limited, and her resistance to narrow stereotypes of Black womanhood, are all characteristics of young Black women that have been discussed and documented by researchers in various disciplines (Fordham 1993; Kaplan 1997; Leadbeater 1996; Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Ward 1990). However, these are still characteristics of young Black women that are seldom heard or valued by policymakers and others who influence community programs for youth. I argue that in examining the factors affecting the lives of young Black women, it is critical that researchers consider self-efficacy—and the many forms self-efficacy assumes—as an important aspect in the shaping of strong identities.

In this paper, I describe a research project that allowed some brief glimpses into the lives of teenage mothers in two low-income communities. First, I begin with a description of the study, the communities involved in the study and the study's influence on my interest in African-American teen mothers. Second, I will discuss some expressions of self-efficacy that emerged from interviews with low-income teenage mothers. Third, I discuss the critical need for youth programs in low-income communities and include some programmatic suggestions that are specific to teen mothers. I also discuss the importance of feminist anthropology in research on community-based youth programs.

### **The Research Project and the Communities**

In the year 2000, I began work on a research project that sought to examine the relationship between youth-focused activities and community well-being. In very broad terms, the study asked: How does the relative integrity of a range of youth-focused organizations reflect the relative integrity of a community's social, economic and cultural capital? I attempted to address this very complex question by observing and interviewing in two very different settings. One setting was a small rural town in northern Louisiana. The other setting was the Enterprise Community of a large metropolitan city in central Florida. Over a five-year period, I interviewed a broad range of educators, service providers, city leaders, ministers, community activists, law enforcement personnel and

program coordinators in both sites. I also interviewed youth, ages 14-21 who were in-school, out of school, unemployed, underemployed or in some transitional or training programs. In the urban setting, the Enterprise Community encompasses 11.8 square miles of the city's total land area which is 108.7 square miles. This section of the city, designated as the Enterprise Community because of its high-poverty, is composed of seven densely populated neighborhoods, often defined by their reputations as dangerous, crime-ridden and economically depressed. Some of the major factors affecting the Enterprise Community included: a budget crisis that had an impact on the entire state with particularly devastating cuts in social services; the election of new leaders in city government (including a new mayor and new city council members); the rapid and consistent growth of the school-aged population, which in turn influenced the need for more schools and more educational resources; welfare reform which directed many low-income people—including many youth—into a tenuous service economy; an escalating unemployment rate and dramatic reforms in housing, which have led to relocation, dislocation and re-concentration of poor people into areas that are both economically depressed and unwelcoming to new (low-income) residents.

The rural setting is a town in northern Louisiana that was once described as the poorest place in America by a major American news magazine. While residents of the town contend that this characterization by a national publication was devastating, demeaning and exaggerated, it is true that the town has suffered enormous serial tragedies over a period of years. A tornado waylaid it in 1992; students torched the high school in 1993; and 20 arson fires within a month ravaged it during the scorching summer of 1995. Two of its police chiefs were convicted of felonies, and crime was so bad by 1997 that the governor sent in the state police for special sweeps. Upon my arrival in 2000, census data revealed that the town was indeed the poorest town in the poorest parish in Louisiana with almost half of its residents living in poverty (49.3 percent of its population of 5, 104). It is true that various forms of racial politics play a role in nearly every aspect of life in the south. However, in this small town racial divisions are stark and palpable. As one African-American resident told me, "We're segregated but its not painful." Poverty, however is quite painful. Black rural poverty—some of which is a remnant of the plantation era—is one of the most enduring problems of the area. Poverty, which is immediately visible at the entrance of the town, is also a racial issue because of the stunning contrasts between Black and White resources. One of the major causes of poverty in the town is a lack of employment opportunities. The 2000 Census listed the unemployment rate for the parish at 16.6 percent. One reason for the lack of employment opportunities is that agricultural practices have changed over time. Agriculture was once the foundation of this community, but drastic changes in

technology have had an impact on this form of employment in this area. The only industry that has expanded in the Delta during the past ten years is the prison industrial complex. In fact, the prison population actually helped prop up those parishes' populations in the 2000 Census, when prisoners could be counted individually for the first time. One Correctional Center for Youth has come under fire because of allegations of neglect, but it employs 400 people. So, as distasteful as it may be, one of the top industries in the Delta is dealing in human cargo. One local elected official explained his support of the prisons bordering the small town. "...I fought so hard to keep them from closing [the Correctional Center]. Do you know what it means to lose 400 jobs out here?" Thus, the proliferation of the prison industrial complex continues. Moreover, the building of a female detention center means that there are now three detention centers and one prison farm on the immediate periphery of the town. These prisons are sources of employment for many people but—as more and more young residents become confined within them—these prisons are also reminders of the tragic consequences of poverty for Black youth.

I describe the conditions affecting both sites to underscore the harsh realities of life for youth in these communities. In both the urban and rural settings of this study, Black youth bare the brunt of extreme poverty. They are limited by diminishing educational resources, lack of employment opportunities and generally damaged economic infrastructures that cannot be repaired with simplistic solutions. My task in this project was to create a broad picture of each community by exploring such aspects as community history, neighborhood ecology, community assets and strengths, demographic characteristics of youth and adults, and various components of change over time. I visited each community three times over a five year period. Each visit lasted about 5-7 days. While this methodology did not lend itself to the sustained engagement necessary for deep, rich, thick ethnographic description, as an experienced community ethnographer I was able to gather a wealth of data from interviews, observations, local newspapers and other resources that helped me to understand overlapping community dynamics. In between visits to both locations, I kept in touch with key informants via email or telephone. I also had research partners in both communities who collected data in between my visits.

A major aspect of the study methodology was the inclusion of youth perspectives. This was done by interviewing respondents, ages 14-21, in diverse locations, including community-based organizations, recreation centers, local schools, and those youth who were participants in various Youth Opportunity programs. In each location, I became very interested in gathering data on programs that serve African-American teenage mothers and the young women's perspectives on these programs. Hence, over the five year period I attempted to create a study within a study and conducted interviews

with 10 African-American teenage mothers. I would catch up with the young women as they came in to take GED classes or to check in after their jobs. I would strike up conversations with them as they dropped by to talk to YO counselors or just hang out with friends. Each interview was recorded and transcribed and I later analyzed the interviews in the context of the research on resiliency, self-efficacy and self-reliance. In each setting, the young women represented diverse family situations in terms of their immediate households. Some lived with parents; others lived with grandparents or in extended family settings. In most cases I was able to conduct individual interviews, which allowed me to gather data on role models, mentors, challenges in their lives and how they handled personal problems. I also organized group discussions for both girls and boys. This allowed me to observe and record comments from the teen mothers as well.

### **Expression of Self-Efficacy**

As Kaplan contends, "The reality of teenage mothers [lives] is that they have to adopt strategies for survival that seem to them to make sense within their social environment..." (Kaplan 1997). While these strategies may seem inadequate, they are often forms of self-efficacy. I use the term self-efficacy to mean the ways in which the young women advocate for themselves, attempt to define themselves, and/or indicate an awareness of the challenges facing them as Black, low-income teenage mothers. At the same time, I am also attempting to identify what several feminist researchers view as subversive behavior and resistance (Fordham 1993; Ward 1996), which—in connection with other aspects of their lives such as spirituality, kin and friend networks of support, and mentors—could facilitate both survival and self-transformation. I view these abstract and sometimes disguised characteristics as beacons of hope struggling to shine within very bleak circumstances. While there is a clear connection between what I am calling self-efficacy and the concept of resiliency, I find the concept of resiliency to be inadequate for analyzing some of the very complex behaviors related to resistance and self-definition that emerge from the narratives of these young women. Researchers examining resiliency think in terms of coping behaviors, the ability to recover in the face of trauma, adaptation to adversity—all characteristics or skills that certainly play major roles in the minute to minute life situations of these young women. However, in attempting to operationalize self-efficacy, I am looking beyond mere survival and into a future with substantive choices.

In order to understand behaviors that can be characterized as self-efficacy, we must examine some of the myths that have been constructed about Black teenage mothers by policymakers, the media, educators and others who attempt to simplify these young women's lives. In her study of Black teenage motherhood, Kaplan refers to some of these myths when she asks:

Are Black teenage mothers responsible for the socioeconomic problems besetting the Black community...? Do Black teenage mothers have different moral values than most Americans? Do they have babies in order to collect welfare as politicians suggest? Do the families of Black teenage mothers condone their deviant behavior as the popular view contends? (Kaplan 1997)

In my interviews with teenage mothers in both urban and rural settings, I found that young women were typically grounded in the realities of their lives. For example, most of the respondents—at some point in our conversations—would discuss their lives in the contexts of their socio-economic status. Hence, one young woman in the urban setting told a number of stories that revealed the brutality of poverty, including stories about serious health problems that were exacerbated by her mothers' limited financial resources. She spoke with great insight about what it was like not to have adequate food, clothing and shelter as she was growing up. Her life only became more difficult when she became a mother at age sixteen. Like this young woman, most of the teenagers I interviewed expressed an understanding of the challenges facing them upon the birth of a child. They also understood the perceptions of Black teenage mothers by society at large. I found that most of the young women expressed ideas about the importance of family—even when they also expressed a lack of family support. Even in the poorest communities, I found that young Black women often expressed dreams and aspirations for a successful future, no matter how unrealistic their ideas may seem to others around them.

As I conducted the interviews I was particularly struck by the very astute responses of African-American teenage girls, particularly those who were mothers. One theme that emerged from their perspectives in both urban and rural settings was the stark and stunning inadequacies of the programs that serve low-income African-American teen mothers. For example, in the urban setting, one young mother of twin toddlers walked to her job every day pushing her babies in their stroller. While the local YO program helped her to secure employment and emphasized the value of remaining employed, no provisions were made for childcare. Consequently, I observed this young woman bringing her babies to the Youth Community Center where she was employed. Other young women who came to “hang out” at the center helped to watch the babies. This was not always a safe situation for the infants. When I interviewed the young mother, she explained that she lived with her grandmother who had a full-time job and could not provide childcare for large blocks of time. When I interviewed the director of the Youth Community Center, she complained about the young woman's tardiness and the inappropriateness of bringing her babies

to work. However, having interviewed several young women who identified the lack of childcare as a critical factor affecting their employment and education, I interpreted the young woman's strategy as a form of self-reliance and self-efficacy. She was doing what she felt she needed to do to remain employed.

### **Community-Based Youth Programs: A Critical Need in Poor Communities**

During the course of this project, I observed or was told about a number of grassroots, nonprofit programs that serve youth in low-income communities. The pivotal program at the time of my research was the Youth Opportunity movement which—ideally—should have worked collaboratively with other neighborhood programs to create innovative and multi-dimensional resources for local youth. However, based on interviews with the young women and other community residents in both settings, YO reproduced the status quo in terms of programming. In other words, there was not a great deal of innovation to be found in the services provided. This was particularly true in the urban setting where competing ideologies (about youth programs) and community politics played themselves out in full dramatic effect right before my observing eyes. This lack of innovation as well as the inability of programs to work cooperatively with each other meant that young mothers in particular were denied opportunities for mentoring, self-exploration, and other creative interventions that could have built upon the strengths and assets they themselves brought to the programs. The lack of progressive, innovative insights in these programs also meant that some of the most important dimensions of these young women's lives were not addressed. One of these dimensions was their status as mothers. The programs I observed basically communicated prevailing notions about low-income teenage mothers which is that since the damage has been done, they—the mothers—should be silent, invisible, compliant consumers of whatever resources are offered. The failures of these programs to identify and build upon self-efficacy, self-reliance, self-definition and self-determination among these young women often reproduces the uncertainty and instability many of these teen mothers face in their home lives.

In the urban setting the YO program lost its funding because the project's directors were unable to adequately coordinate and organize programs with youth in the Enterprise Community. The geographic area alone presented enormous logistical challenges and over half the youth population never benefited from YO's presence in the community. In the rural setting the YO program has continued beyond the government's five year commitment because the project director was able to demonstrate the potential for sustainability and positive outcomes for youth in the town as a result of YO interventions.

There remains a tremendous need for programs that provide educational, recreational and social supports to low-income youth. When these programs are absent in very poor communities, teenage mothers are particularly vulnerable to falling deeper into dire circumstances despite their best efforts to advocate for themselves. The young mothers I interviewed all suggested in one way or another that youth programs should provide systems of support that historically were provided by kin networks. Their stories of resistance and self-determination all indicate that their multiple needs are interconnected and a deficit in one area of their lives affects all aspects of their lives. The young mothers indicate a need for education in issues related to sexuality as well as support in the development of sound parenting skills.

These are all recommendations from youth who are expected to negotiate the treacherous barriers erected by systemic poverty. Yet, they have few opportunities to express their daily needs and struggles. As a feminist anthropologist, I felt it was urgent that I include in my report the opinions, the views, the lived realities—indeed the voices—of those whose lives should be valued by community leaders. Hence, in further evaluations of community youth programs, I suggested that ethnographic methodology continue to be a part of the evaluative process. I also suggested that all evaluations of these programs specifically incorporate the observations of teenage mothers. For feminist anthropologists, I strongly suggest more community-based research that examines the quality and depth of youth programming and the ways in which these programs incorporate teen mothers. While there are a number of studies that seek to understand the factors that contribute to teenage motherhood, there are not enough studies that focus on the impact of community-based programs on young women in low-income neighborhoods. Feminist anthropology provides a framework for analyzing not only systemic poverty but also interlocking systems of oppression. These interlocking systems of oppression dictate a need for youth programs that are multi-dimensional in scope. From my own perspective as an applied, feminist community researcher, I see the absolute necessity of collaborative efforts among various community entities in the provision of programs for low-income youth. In each of the communities I studied, many programs had the potential to provide critical resources for youth in seriously distressed neighborhoods. The programs also could have played more substantive roles in engaging educators, business leaders, and professionals in the lives of youth. The devastation wrought by the failures of these programs reverberates for generations and contributes to the despair that is often an embedded characteristic of poor communities. Youth programs need to raise the community's awareness of youth as a very special constituency whose educational and personal suc-

cess influence the entire community's future. Low-income teenage mothers should not be dismissed as failures, but should be offered safe spaces to develop their individual, independent and diverse identities. Moreover, for the teenagers in the community who are daughters, sisters, students, workers and mothers, these programs must provide a life line that builds upon their strengths and opens avenues that will take them beyond today and pass tomorrow.

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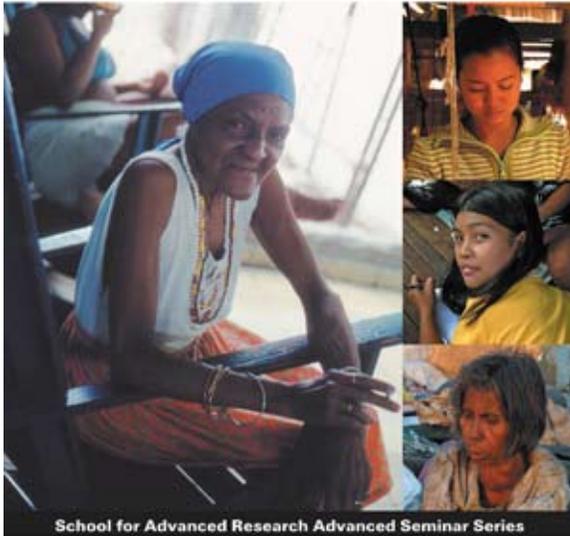
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## Report on the Zora Neale Hurston Travel Award 2007

We are pleased to congratulate the following four students, who were each awarded Zora Neale Hurston Travel awards of \$500 each for travel to the 2007 American Anthropological Association meeting in Washington, DC.

**Lauren Fordyce**, University of Florida: God Brings Children: Morality and Reproductive "Choice" Among Haitians in South Florida.

**Brenda Sendejo**, University of Texas at Austin: Spiritual Agency in the Borderlands: Our Lady of Guadalupe/Tonantzin as an Expression of Tejana Activism.

**Kenda Stewart**, University of Iowa: "Football 4 Peace": Palestinian and Jewish Citizens Search for a Common Playground.

**Lal Zimman**, University of Colorado at Boulder: Ideologies and Inequalities in research on transgender communities.

The Zora Neale Hurston travel award has been an AFA tradition since 2002. It was established to honor the contributions of pioneering African American anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Eligibility is restricted to students and recent PhDs focusing on issues of concern to feminist anthropology. Preference is given to individuals from underrepresented US groups. The winning awardees will be notified prior to the AAA meetings, but the awards will be formally announced and checks given out at the AFA business meeting held in conjunction with the AAA meetings. Details for this competition for the 2008 meetings in San Francisco will be posted to the AFA web site soon

(<http://sscl.berkeley.edu/~afaweb/travel.html>)