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**CODE**  
**OF**  
**THE**  
**STREET**

**DECENCY, VIOLENCE, AND THE  
MORAL LIFE OF THE INNER CITY**

**Elijah Anderson**

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## Down Germantown Avenue



ERMANTOWN Avenue is a major Philadelphia artery that dates back to colonial days. Eight and a half miles long and running mostly southeast, it links the northwest suburbs with the heart of inner-city Philadelphia. It traverses a varied social terrain as well. Germantown Avenue provides an excellent cross section of the social ecology of a major American city. Along this artery live the well-to-do, the middle classes, the working poor, and the very poor—the diverse segments of urban society. The story of Germantown Avenue can therefore serve in many respects as a metaphor for the whole city. This book, which is about the “code of the street,” begins with an introduction to the world of the streets by way of a tour down Germantown Avenue.

One of the most salient features of urban life in the minds of many people today is the relative prevalence of violence. Our tour down Germantown Avenue will focus both on the role of violence in the social organization of the communities through which the avenue passes and on how violence is revealed in the interactions of people up and down the street. The avenue, we will see, is a natural continuum characterized largely by a code of civility at one end and a code of conduct regulated by the threat of violence—the code of

the street—at the other.<sup>1</sup> But the people living along this continuum make their own claims on civility and the street as well.

We begin at the top of the hill that gives Chestnut Hill its name. Chestnut Hill is the first neighborhood within the city of Philadelphia as you come into town from the northwest. Often called the “suburb in the city,” it is a predominantly residential community consisting mostly of affluent and educated white people, but it is increasingly becoming racially and ethnically mixed. The houses are mostly large, single buildings, surrounded by lawns and trees. The business and shopping district along Germantown Avenue draws shoppers from all over the city. At the very top of the hill is the large Borders bookstore. Across the street is the regional-rail train station, with the local library in close proximity. Moving southeast down the avenue, you pass a variety of mostly small, upscale businesses: gourmet food shops, a camera shop, an optician’s, a sporting goods store, a bank, jewelry stores, and clothing boutiques. Many of the buildings are old or built to look old and are made of fieldstone with slanted slate roofs, giving the area a quaint appearance. You see many different kinds of people—old and young, black and white, affluent, middle class, and working class. Women push babies in carriages. Couples stroll hand in hand. Everyone is polite and seems relaxed. When people pass one another on the sidewalk, they may make eye contact. People stand about nonchalantly on the sidewalk, sometimes with their backs to the street. You don’t get the feeling that there is any hostility or that people are on guard against the possibility of being compromised or insulted or robbed. A pleasant ambiance prevails—an air of civility.

At this end of Germantown Avenue, the community appears to be racially integrated in its public relationships, perhaps self-consciously so. You see integrated play groups among small children on the playgrounds. At the bank, there is relaxed interaction between a black teller and a white client. There are biracial groups of friends. At the Boston Market restaurant, blacks and whites eat together or simply sit side by side. A black man drives by in a Range Rover; two well-dressed black women pull up in a black Lexus. In their clothing and cars; the people who make up the black middle class choose styles and colors that are noticeably expensive: they are

expressive in laying claim to middle-class status. The white middle-class people are likely to be driving older cars or wearing worn clothes.

In the upscale stores here, there is not usually apparent a great concern for security. During the day the plate-glass windows have appealing displays; some shops even have unguarded merchandise out on the sidewalk.

Once in a while, however, a violent incident does occur in Chestnut Hill. A holdup occurred at the bank in the middle of the day not long ago, ending in a shoot-out on the sidewalk. The perpetrators were black, and two black men recently robbed and shot up a tavern on the avenue. Such incidents give the residents here the simplistic yet persistent view that blacks commit crime and white people do not. That does not mean that the white people here think that the black people they ordinarily see on the streets are bound to rob them: many of these people are too sophisticated to believe that all blacks are inclined to criminality. But the fact that black people robbed the bank and that blacks commit a large number of crimes in the area does give a peculiar edge to race relations, and the racial reality of street crime affects the relations between blacks and whites. Because everybody knows that the simplistic view does exist, even middle-class blacks have to work consciously against that stereotype—although the whites do as well. Both groups know the reality that crime is likely to be perpetrated by young black males. The distinctions of wealth—and the fact that black people are generally disenfranchised and white people are not—operate in the back of the minds of people here.

A black male walking into the stores, especially a jewelry store, can see this phenomenon. The sales personnel pay particular attention to people until they feel they have passed inspection, and black males are almost always given extra scrutiny. Most blacks in Chestnut Hill are middle class or even wealthy, although others come into the neighborhood as dayworkers. Yet many are disturbed by the inability of some whites to make distinctions—particularly between people who are out to commit crime and those who are not.

The knowledge that there are poor blacks farther down the ave-

nue leads people "here" to be on guard against people from "there." Security guards tend to follow young black males around stores looking for the emblems and signs that they are from "there" and not from "here." And at night, stores do have exterior security devices, although these devices are designed to appear decorative.

These factors can, but most often do not, compromise civility between the races in Chestnut Hill; in fact, people get along. This is evident at the "Farmer's Market" just off the avenue. The market caters to the residents of the local community but at the same time draws shoppers from miles away. It is open from Thursday through Saturday. On Saturdays it is especially vibrant, and the general ambience is friendly. Here is a flower shop, there a vegetable grocer, a butcher, a coffee retailer, a Middle Eastern foods store, and an Asian woman selling fresh fish. Because the clientele is affluent, the quality of the foods and service is high. The shoppers are mainly well-to-do white women, occasionally accompanied by a disheveled husband wearing worn tennis shoes and a moth-eaten sweater. On Saturday mornings the place becomes something of social scene, buzzing with activity. Younger and older couples shop, laugh, and talk. Residents from a wide radius come here to shop, but also to bump into friends and neighbors. A set of tables and chairs—conveniently located next to the coffee bar—allows people to take a break from their shopping and to socialize with friends; here children occasionally sit and wait for their parents. Street violence is the farthest thing from anyone's mind. In this market you can observe the racial diversity of the local community. Contrary to the negative stereotype of American race and ethnic relations, people here are quite civil and respectful to one another. There is no racial tension here; comity and good will are dominant themes. And it is safe to say that almost everyone here is law-abiding. Although most of the people are white, virtually every ethnic group is represented, including Jewish, Italian, Iranian, Irish, Amish—and a few middle-class black people are always present as well. The black people who come here are always middle class and are treated well, if not subtly patronized. Generally, blacks like it here. On close inspection, however, one notes that few shops employ black people; a black face behind the counter is rare. While this reality may bother some, most

black shoppers make nothing of it. It is just something mentally noted and politely accepted, serving as a background understanding that prevents some from feeling completely welcome here.

Around the corner, on the avenue again, the Chestnut Hill Grill provides an outdoor restaurant, and it is not unusual to see blacks and whites, or a certain diversity of people, eating and drinking here, at times in a common party. Such scenes strongly belie the widely held image of great tensions in race relations. At this end of the avenue, race and ethnicity are played down, and social harmony is a rather common theme.

Down the hill, beyond Boston Market, is Cresheim Valley Road, a neighborhood boundary. On the other side, we are in Mount Airy, a different social milieu. Here there are more black homeowners interspersed among white ones, and there is more black street traffic on Germantown Avenue. Mount Airy itself is a much more integrated neighborhood than Chestnut Hill, and the black people who live here are mostly middle class. A perfunctory look at this part of Germantown Avenue might give the impression that this is a predominantly black neighborhood, mainly because there is so much black street traffic. Here the shops and stores along the avenue tend to be used by blacks much more than by whites. But many businesses, including an upscale restaurant, a dance studio, and a barbecue grill, have a racially and economically mixed clientele. Generally, though, white and middle-class black adults from here tend to use the stores in Chestnut Hill, finding that they offer goods and services more consistent with their tastes. As a result, the shops in Mount Airy tend to have a greater black presence. And on the annual Mount Airy Day fair, Germantown Avenue is full of people reflecting its racially mixed character and harmony. But farther down the avenue this scene changes rather abruptly.

A sign that we are in a different social setting is that exterior bars begin to appear on the store windows and riot gates show up on the doors—at first on businesses such as the state-run liquor store. Pizza parlors, karate shops, takeout stores that sell beer, and storefront organizations such as neighborhood health care centers appear—establishments not present in Chestnut Hill. There are discount stores of various sorts, black barbershops, and other busi-

nesses that cater both to the black middle class and to employed working-class and poorer blacks. Many of the black middle-class youths use the street as a place to gather and talk with their friends, and they adopt the clothing styles of the poorer people farther down the avenue. So people who are not familiar with black people are sometimes unable to distinguish between who is law-abiding and who is not. The resulting confusion appears to be a standing problem for the police and local store owners, and it may lead to a sense of defensiveness among middle-class residents who fear being violated or robbed. But promising protection on the street, it is a confusion that many youths seem not to mind and at times work to encourage.

Continuing down the avenue, we pass the Mount Airy playground, with its basketball court, which in mild weather is always a buzzing place. Evenings and weekends it is full of young black men playing pickup games; occasionally adolescent girls serve as spectators. There is a real social mix here, with kids from middle-class, working-class, and poor black families all coming together in this spot. For young men the basic urban uniform of sneakers and baggy jeans is much in evidence—and that gives pause to other people, particularly whites (who tend to avoid the avenue's public spaces). In many ways, however, the atmosphere is easygoing. The place isn't crime ridden or necessarily feared by most blacks, but it betrays a certain edge compared with similar but less racially complex settings farther up the avenue. Here it is prudent to be wary—not everyone on the street recognizes and respects the rule of law, the law that is encoded in the criminal statutes and enforced by the police.

Yet next to the playground is a branch of the Free Library, one of the best in the city, which caters mainly to the literate people of Mount Airy, black and white. Indeed, the social and racial mix of the community is sometimes more visible in the library than on the street itself. Along this part of Germantown Avenue, Mount Airy boasts many beautiful old buildings. But the piano repair shops, sandwich stores, and other businesses located in them tend to have exterior bars and riot gates, a sign that militates against the notion of civility as the dominant theme of the place. A competing definition of affairs emerges, and that is the prevalence of crime, the

perpetrators of which are most often concerned not with legality but with feasibility. Ten years ago fewer bars were on the windows and the buildings were better maintained. Today more relatively alienated black poor people are occupying the public space. There are still whites among the storekeepers and managers of various establishments, but whites often have been displaced in the outdoor public spaces by poorer blacks. Moreover, the farther down the avenue you go, the less well maintained the buildings are. Even when they are painted, for example, the painting tends to have been done haphazardly, without great regard for architectural detail.

In this section a prominent billboard warns that those who commit insurance fraud go to jail. (No such signs appear in Chestnut Hill.) There is graffiti—or evidence that it has recently been removed. More dilapidated buildings appear, looking as though they receive no maintenance. Yet among them are historic buildings, some of which are cared for in ways that suggest that people appreciate their historic status. One of them is the house where the Battle of Germantown was fought during the Revolutionary War. Another was a stop on the underground railroad.

As Mount Airy gives way to Germantown, check-cashing agencies and beeper stores as well as more small takeout stores appear, selling beer, cheesesteaks, and other snack food. More of the windows are boarded up, and riot gates and exterior bars become the norm, evoking in the user of the street a certain wariness.

On the avenue Germantown gives the appearance of a segregated, black, working-class neighborhood. But this is deceptive. Many whites, including middle-class whites along with middle-class blacks, do live here, but they tend to avoid the business district. Or the stores simply do not attract them. On Germantown Avenue, discount stores of all sorts appear—supermarkets, furniture stores, and clothing stores—and of the people you pass now, many more are part of the "street element." Here people watch their backs and are more careful how they present themselves. It isn't that they are worried every moment that somebody might violate them, but people are more aware of others who are sharing the space with them, some of whom may be looking for an easy target to rob or just intimidate.



Germantown High School, once a model of racially integrated, quality education, is now almost all black and a shadow of its former academic self. Many of the students are now impoverished and associated with the street element, and even most of those who aren't have a need to show themselves as being capable of dealing with the street. In fact, the hallways of the school are in many ways an extension of the street. Across the street from the high school is a store selling beer, and young people often hang out there.

Continuing down the avenue, we pass blocks of small businesses: taverns, Chinese takeout places, barbershops and hair salons, Laundromats, storefront churches, pawnshops. Groups of young people loiter on street corners. We also begin to see empty lots and boarded-up buildings, some of them obviously quite grand at one time. A charred McDonald's sign rises above a weed-covered lot. A police car is parked at the corner, its occupants keeping a watchful eye on the street activity. After a time, the officers begin to drive slowly down the street.

Just before Cheltenham Avenue, a major artery that intersects Germantown Avenue, comes Vernon Park. The park has an informal caretaker who is trying to keep it maintained despite the meager municipal resources and the carelessness and even vandalism of some of the people who like to gather there. A mural has been painted on the side of an adjacent building. Flowers have been planted. On warm days, couples "making time" sit about on the benches, on the steps of statues, and on the hoods of cars parked along the park's edge. But even during the day, in public, men drink alcoholic beverages out of paper sacks, and at night the park becomes a dangerous place where drug dealing and other shadowy businesses are conducted. This is a "staging area," so-called because the activities that occur here set the stage for other activities, which may be played out either on the spot in front of the people who have congregated here or else in less conspicuous locations. A verbal altercation in Vernon Park may be settled with a fight, with or without gunplay, down a side street. People "profile" here, "representing" the image of themselves by which they would like to be known: who they are and how they stand in relation to whom.

The streets around the park buzz with activity, legal and illegal.

A certain flagrant disregard for the law is visible.<sup>2</sup> A teenage boy walks by with an open bottle of beer in his hand, taking a swig whenever he pleases.

A young man in his twenties crosses the street after taking care of some business with another young man, gets into his new black BMW automobile, and sidles up next to his girlfriend, who has been waiting there for him. He is dressed in a crisp white T-shirt with "Hilfiger" emblazoned across the back of it, black satin shorts with bright red stripes on the sides, and expensive white sneakers. He makes a striking figure as he slides into his vehicle, and others take note. He moves with aplomb, well aware that he is where he wants to be and, for that moment at least, where some others want to be as well. And his presentation of self announces that he can take care of himself should someone choose to tangle with him.

Here in Germantown public, an area diverse in class and race, there is generally less respect for the codes of civil behavior that underlie life in Chestnut Hill. The people of Germantown are overwhelmingly committed to civil behavior, behavior based on trust and the rule of law, yet there is a sense that violence is just below the surface in some pockets of the community. That fact necessitates a careful way of moving, of acting, of getting up and down the streets. While it may not always be necessary to throw down the gauntlet, so to speak, and be ready to punch someone out, it is important, as people here say, to "know what time it is"—not by the clock but by reading people, places, and situations. And it is important to grasp the public signals of what is yet to come, but then to show one's capability of dealing with these situations. It is this form of regulation of social interaction in public that, as we will see in this volume, makes up the code of the street. People understand that you are not always tested, but you have to be ready for the test when it comes. Mr. Don Moses, an old head of the black community, described the code this way: "Keep your eyes and ears open at all times. Walk two steps forward and look back. Watch your back. Prepare yourself verbally and physically. Even if you have a cane, carry something. The older people do carry something, guns in sheaths. They can't physically fight no more, so they carry a gun."

People here feel they must watch their backs, because anything

can happen here, and if the police are called, they may not arrive in time. Robberies and gunfire have been known to occur in broad daylight. People experience danger here, but they also relax and go about their business. In general, there is an edge to public life at Cheltenham and Germantown Avenues that you don't find in Chestnut Hill.

Two blocks away is a middle-class residential area. Yet Cheltenham Avenue itself is lined with discount chain stores and fast-food restaurants, which, in contrast to those in Chestnut Hill or Mount Airy, dominate some neighborhood blocks. Also located here are a police station, a state employment agency, and a welfare office; like the chain stores, they represent connections with the wider society of government and large-scale businesses. On Tuesday mornings food-stamp lines snake around Greene Street at Cheltenham. There are also individual "little people" here, running small, sometimes fly-by-night businesses. These enterprises coexist, serving people who barely have enough to survive, and this lack of resources encourages a dog-eat-dog mentality along Cheltenham Avenue. Yet there is a great deal of other activity, too. Especially on warm summer days and nights, a carnival atmosphere sometimes reigns. And the fact that this area is diverse both racially and socially works to offset somewhat the feeling of social isolation among the poor black residents of Germantown.

Occasionally, residents of Chestnut Hill drive this far down Germantown Avenue, and seeing what this neighborhood looks like certainly has an impact on their consciousness. Not venturing to look below the surface, they take in the sea of black faces, the noise, the seeming disorder, and the poverty. When reading about urban violence, they associate it with places like this. In fact, this neighborhood is not as violent as they assume. To be sure, hustlers, prostitutes, and drug dealers are in evidence, but they coexist with—and are indeed outnumbered by—working people in legitimate jobs who are trying to avoid trouble.

As you move beyond Cheltenham Avenue, you pass through quieter stretches that reflect the residential nature of the surrounding streets; such residential streets alternate with concentrated business strips. Many of the businesses are skin, hair, and nail salons. A com-

mon aspiration of the poorer girls in these neighborhoods is to go to beauty school and become cosmetologists.

You pass by the old town square of Germantown, which is surrounded by old, historically certified houses. Such houses appear sporadically for a long way down the avenue. Some are badly in need of repair. Just beyond the square is Germantown Friends School, a private school founded 150 years ago on what was then the outskirts of town but which is now surrounded by the city.

Farther down, more and more boarded-up buildings appear, along with even more empty lots. In fact, certain areas give the impression of no-man's-lands, with empty dirt or overgrown lots, a few isolated buildings here and there, few cars on the street, and almost no people on the sidewalks. You pass billboards advertising "forties" (forty-ounce beer), cigarettes, and other kinds of liquor. Churches are a prominent feature of the cityscape as a whole. Along this part of Germantown Avenue, some of the churches are very large and well known, with a rich history and architecturally resembling those in Chestnut Hill and Mount Airy, but others are storefront churches that tend to come and go with the founding pastor.

People move up and down the street at all times of the day. In the middle of the morning, groups of young men can be seen standing on corners, eyeing the street traffic. Morning is generally the safest time of day. As evening approaches, the possibility of violence increases, and after nightfall the code of the street holds sway all along the lower section of the avenue. Under that rule the toughest, the biggest, and the boldest individual prevails. Down farther, a school is in recess. Kids are crowding into a makeshift eatery, where someone is barbecuing hot dogs and ribs and selling them. At play small children hone their physical skills, standing down adversaries, punching each other lightly, playfully sizing each other up. This sort of ritual play-fighting, playing at the code, is commonplace.

As we continue down the street, collision-repair shops appear—former gas stations surrounded by many abandoned cars in various states of disrepair and degradation—and then music stores and a nightclub. Now Germantown Avenue reaches Broad Street, Philadelphia's major north-south artery, nearly at the intersection of Broad and Erie Avenue, which runs east-west. The triangle formed

by these streets is one of the centers of the North Philadelphia ghetto. In contrast to residents farther up the avenue, people here are often extremely poor. Unlike Germantown proper, where a fair number of working-class, along with many middle-class people reside, here there is concentrated ghetto poverty. This area of the city is in the depths of the inner city—the so-called hyperghetto—and people here are very much socially isolated from mainstream America.<sup>3</sup>

Just beyond Broad Street is another business strip with the same sorts of establishments we saw farther up the avenue—stores selling clothing, sneakers, furniture, and electronics. Many offer layaway plans. In addition, there are businesses that cater mostly to the criminal class, such as pawnshops and beeper stores. Pawnshops are, in a sense, banks for thieves; they are places where stolen goods can be traded for cash, few questions asked. Check-cashing exchanges, which continue to be a common sight, also ask few questions, but they charge exorbitant fees for cashing a check. As in Chestnut Hill, merchandise is often displayed on the sidewalk, but here it is under the watchful eye of unsmiling security guards. The noise level here is also much louder. Cars drive by with their stereo systems blaring. Farther down, young people walk down the street or gather on someone's stoop with their boom boxes vibrating, the bass turned way up. On adjacent streets, open-air drug deals occur, prostitutes ply their trade, and boys shoot craps, while small children play in trash-strewn abandoned lots. This is the face of persistent urban poverty.

It is also another staging area, where people stand around, "looking things over," as they say. Here, phrases like "watch your back" take on literal meaning. Friends bond and reassure one another, saying, "I got your back," for there are always people in the vicinity looking for opportunities to violate others or simply to get away with something. For the most part, public decency gets little respect. A man opens his car door despite approaching traffic, seeming to dare someone to hit him. Farther down the block a woman simply stops her car in the middle of the street, waiting for her man to emerge from a barbershop. She waits for about ten minutes, holding up traffic. No one complains, no one honks a car horn; people sim-

ply go around her, for they know that to complain is to risk an altercation, or at least heated words. They prefer not to incur this woman's wrath, which could escalate into warfare. In Chestnut Hill, where civility is generally the order of the day, people might "call" others on such behavior, but here it is the general level of violence that tends to keep irritation in check—except among those who are "crazy." In this way, the code of the street provides an element of social organization and actually lessens the probability of random violence. When the woman's man arrives, he simply steps around to the passenger side and, without showing any concern for others, gets into the car. The pair drive off, apparently believing it to be their right to do what they just did.

At Tioga Street, Temple University Hospital, whose emergency room sees gunshot and stabbing victims just about every night, the code of the street is very much in evidence. In the morning and early afternoon, the surrounding neighborhood is peaceful enough, but in the evening the danger level rises. Especially on weekends, tensions spill over, drug deals go bad, fights materialize seemingly out of nowhere, and the emergency room becomes a hub of activity. Sometimes the victims bypass the hospital: by the time they are found, there is no place to take them but the morgue. Nearby is a liquor store and a deli selling cold beer. People buy liquor there and drink it on the street, adding to the volatility of the street scene.

On a back street, amid crumbling houses and abandoned stolen automobiles whose carcasses are constantly picked at by some impoverished residents for spare parts, children "rip and run," playing double Dutch (jump-rope games) and stickball. At the corner store young children pass in and out. Mostly they buy cigarettes (for parents or other adults), candy, Slim Jims, potato chips, bread, and soda.

The summer streets are populated by these children and sometimes their mothers, grandmothers, older sisters, and female cousins. It is mostly a very poor neighborhood of women and small children, who make up extremely important kinship networks that work to sustain their members; at times, others are enlisted as fictive kin for needed help. These residents, if they are employed, work as dishwashers, mechanics, and domestics, as well as in other menial jobs.



Some working poor people survive by living with kin and thus sharing household duties and close family life—joys as well as troubles. A large number of the women are on welfare, and many are very apprehensive about “welfare reform.” Eligible men seem a scarce presence in their lives.

When present at all, men appear most often in the roles of nephew, cousin, father, uncle, boyfriend, and son, but seldom as husband. A few older men are retired and sit on the stoops, laughing and talking with their friends. Some will extend themselves, helping women in need of support, at times driving them on errands for a negotiated fee, for sexual favors, or in simple friendship.

In a crisis—say, when young women with children become strung out on crack and other drugs to the point of being unable to function as mothers—a friend or relative may help out, but in some of the most desperate situations, the oldest children may take over, procuring and preparing food and performing other household duties. At other times, a grandmother assumes a crack addict’s household chores and steps in to raise her daughter’s children. In the neighborhood, stories circulate about this or that crack-addicted young mother who is abusing her children in favor of the pipe. Everyone knows someone or knows about someone with a drug habit whose life has been impacted in some way by drugs.

While most residents struggle with poverty, there are some solidly working-class nuclear families living here, at times with a man still employed by a local factory, but this situation is rare. Often those working-class residents who could, have left the area, routed by crime, incivility, and persistent poverty.

Small groups of seven- and eight-year-old street kids hang out on the corners or in the local alleys; they watch the traffic go by, observing the recurring drug sales, although many pretend not to see. Street lore says that local drug dealers employ some of them as lookouts for crack houses or to signal dealers when a new shipment of drugs has arrived at a pickup point.

On summer days residents lean out of their windows to catch a breeze or sit on stoops to watch the traffic go by. There is much street life here, involving young men, young women, old people, middle-aged people. To walk the streets is to observe many preg-

nant young women, walking or standing around with one or two children. Their youthful faces belie their distended bellies, but they carry on.

The streets are noisy and very much alive with sociability—yells, screams, loud laughter and talk, car screeches, rap music, and honking horns. A car pulls up and honks its horn for a passenger. People are basically courteous, not wanting to provoke others. There are smiles and a certain level of camaraderie. Everybody knows everybody here, and as best they can, some people try to watch out for others.

But many have their hands full watching out for themselves. Like aluminum siding at an earlier time, decorative iron bars have become a status symbol in the neighborhood, and residents acquire them for downstairs windows and doors to be used for protection against thieves and “zombies” (crack addicts). These residents show real concern about any stranger who seems at all questionable.

Now and again a young boy appears, dressed in an expensive athletic suit and white sneakers (usually new; some boys have four or five pair). On certain street corners or down certain alleys, small groups of boys pass the time in the middle of the day. They profile or represent, striking stylized poses, almost always dressed in expensive clothes that belie their unemployed status. They lead others to the easy conclusion that they “clock” (work) in the drug trade. A common view on the streets among the corner men is that the families of some of these boys “know about” their involvements, because they “get some of the money” for help with household expenses. Corner men talk of parents’ tacit acceptance and willing ignorance of their youngster’s drug dealing, although the parents may express their worry about the boy, about the random gunshots that sometimes come from a passing automobile, about the occasional drug wars that sometimes start up spontaneously, and about the possibility of their son’s arrest by the police. They worry often about the police, not just because of the prospect of incarceration but because the family in some cases has come to rely on the drug money.

In the impoverished inner-city neighborhood, the drug trade is everywhere, and it becomes ever more difficult to separate the drug culture from the experience of poverty. The neighborhood is sprin-

kled with crack dens located in abandoned buildings or in someone's home. On corner after corner, young men peddle drugs the way a newsboy peddles papers. To those who pass their brief inspection, they say, "Psst, psst! I got the news. I got the news. 'Caine, blow. Beam me up, Scotty." These are code words easily understood by those in the know. At times they sell drugs to passing motorists, who stop in broad daylight and hold up traffic during the transaction; yet the police seem indifferent to the dealing or they sometimes abuse the very residents they are supposed to protect. When customers drive up, small children will occasionally be sitting in the backseat, which seems to faze neither the dealers nor the customer. Some of these young men carry beepers, which they use in conjunction with the telephone to make their sales; in fact, as pressure has been placed on the local crack houses and on the open-air street sales, the beeper and telephone have become more important. For other young people the beeper has become a status symbol, emblematic of the possession of money, daring, coolness, and drugs.

Almost any denizen of these streets has come to accept the area as a tough place, a neighborhood where the strongest survive and where people who are not careful and streetwise can become ensnared in the games of those who could hurt them. When the boys admire another's property, they may simply try to take it; this includes that person's sneakers, jacket, hat, and other personal items. In this sense, the public spaces develop an air of incivility about them, particularly at night, and as a consequence many feel that the younger people are uncivilized. But the viewpoints of the young are to be distinguished from those of the older people, who sometimes proudly claim that they were *raised* under a different system with different opportunities and different abilities to realize them, while offering that kids today "just grow up." The older people try to live out their values of decency and law-abidingness; and even though these continue to be important values in the neighborhood, the young generally do not seem as committed to them as the older residents.

As we continue down the avenue, more and more gaps in the rows of houses appear; these gaps represent places where buildings have burned down, have been torn down, or have simply collapsed.

Others are shells; their windows and large parts of their walls are gone, leaving beams exposed. Still others are boarded up, perhaps eventually to collapse, perhaps to be rebuilt. Indeed, signs of regeneration are visible among those of destruction. Here and there a house is well maintained, even freshly painted. Some of the exposed outer walls of standing structures have colorful, upbeat murals painted on them, often with religious themes. We pass a large building, a car repair shop, gaily decorated with graffiti art, including a freshly painted "memorial" for a young victim of street violence. Farther down, we pass a hotel that rents rooms by the hour.

We continue to see signs of the avenue's past life—large churches built by European immigrants at the turn of the century, an old cemetery, an occasional historic building. The many open areas—empty lots, little overgrown parks—underline the winding character of this old highway as it cuts through the grid street pattern that was formally laid out well after Germantown Avenue became an established thoroughfare.

Another business district appears, with the usual stores catering to the very poor. Two policemen pass by on foot patrol. This is another staging area. The concentration of people drawn by the businesses increases the chance that violence will erupt. A lot of people are out, not just women and children but a conspicuous number of young men as well, even though it is still morning.

We enter an area where there seem to be more empty lots and houses you can see right through than solidly standing buildings. Some of the lots are a heap of rubble. Others are overgrown with weeds or littered with abandoned cars. The idea of a war zone springs to mind. Indeed, gunshot marks are evident on some of the buildings. The black ghetto here gives way to the Hispanic ghetto. The faces are different, but the behavior is the same. Yet in the midst of this desolation stands a newly built gated community in the Spanish style. Just beyond it, we reach Norris Street; at this intersection three of the four corners are large empty lots. But we also pass an open area that has been transformed into a community garden. Now, in late spring, vegetables in the early stages of growth are visible.

We are now just north of Philadelphia's downtown. This used to

be a bustling commercial area, where factories produced everything from beer to lace and where the goods were stored in huge warehouses before being shipped out, either by rail, traces of which are still manifest, or through the nearby port on the Delaware River. Here and there some of these behemoths remain standing, although one by one they are falling victim to arson.

Finally we reach the other end of Germantown Avenue in the midst of a leveled area about a block from the river and overshadowed by the elevated interstate highway that now allows motorists to drive over North Philadelphia rather than through it—thereby ignoring its street life, its inhabitants, and its problems.

### THE CODE OF THE STREET

Of all the problems besetting the poor inner-city black community, none is more pressing than that of interpersonal violence and aggression. This phenomenon wreaks havoc daily on the lives of community residents and increasingly spills over into downtown and residential middle-class areas. Muggings, burglaries, carjackings, and drug-related shootings, all of which may leave their victims or innocent bystanders dead, are now common enough to concern all urban and many suburban residents.

The inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor—the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, limited basic public services (police response in emergencies, building maintenance, trash pickup, lighting, and other services that middle-class neighborhoods take for granted), the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and absence of hope for the future. Simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior. Although there are often forces in the community that can counteract the negative influences—by far the most powerful is a strong, loving, “decent” (as inner-city residents put it) family that is committed to middle-class values—the despair is pervasive enough to have spawned an oppositional culture, that of “the

street,” whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society. These two orientations—decent and street—organize the community socially, and the way they coexist and interact has important consequences for its residents, particularly for children growing up in the inner city. Above all, this environment means that even youngsters whose home lives reflect mainstream values—and most of the homes in the community do—must be able to handle themselves in a street-oriented environment.

This is because the street culture has evolved a “code of the street,” which amounts to a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence.<sup>4</sup> The rules prescribe both proper comportment and the proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so supply a rationale allowing those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way. The rules have been established and are enforced mainly by the street-oriented; but on the streets the distinction between street and decent is often irrelevant. Everybody knows that if the rules are violated, there are penalties. Knowledge of the code is thus largely defensive, and it is literally necessary for operating in public. Therefore, though families with a decency orientation are usually opposed to the values of the code, they often reluctantly encourage their children’s familiarity with it in order to enable them to negotiate the inner-city environment.

At the heart of the code is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated “right” or being granted one’s “props” (or proper due) or the deference one deserves. However, in the troublesome public environment of the inner city, as people increasingly feel buffeted by forces beyond their control, what one deserves in the way of respect becomes ever more problematic and uncertain. This situation in turn further opens up the issue of respect to sometimes intense interpersonal negotiation, at times resulting in altercations. In the street culture, especially among young people, respect is viewed as almost an external entity, one that is hard-won but easily lost—and so must constantly be guarded. The rules of the code in fact provide a framework for negotiating respect. With the right amount of respect, individuals can avoid being bothered in public. This security is important, for if they *are* bothered, not only may they face physical danger, but

they will have been disgraced or “dissed” (disrespected). Many of the forms dissing can take may seem petty to middle-class people (maintaining eye contact for too long, for example), but to those invested in the street code, these actions, a virtual slap in the face, become serious indications of the other person’s intentions. Consequently, such people become very sensitive to advances and slights, which could well serve as a warning of imminent physical attack or confrontation.

The hard reality of the world of the street can be traced to the profound sense of alienation from mainstream society and its institutions felt by many poor inner-city black people, particularly the young. The code of the street is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system—and in others who would champion one’s personal security. The police, for instance, are most often viewed as representing the dominant white society and as not caring to protect inner-city residents. When called, they may not respond, which is one reason many residents feel they must be prepared to take extraordinary measures to defend themselves and their loved ones against those who are inclined to aggression. Lack of police accountability has in fact been incorporated into the local status system: the person who is believed capable of “taking care of himself” is accorded a certain deference and regard, which translates into a sense of physical and psychological control. The code of the street thus emerges where the influence of the police ends and where personal responsibility for one’s safety is felt to begin. Exacerbated by the proliferation of drugs and easy access to guns, this volatile situation results in the ability of the street-oriented minority (or those who effectively “go for bad”) to dominate the public spaces.

## Decent and Street Families



ALMOST everyone residing in poor inner-city neighborhoods is struggling financially and therefore feels a certain distance from the rest of America, but there are degrees of alienation, captured by the terms “decent” and “street” or “ghetto,” suggesting social types. The decent family and the street family in a real sense represent two poles of value orientation, two contrasting conceptual categories.<sup>1</sup> The labels “decent” and “street,” which the residents themselves use, amount to evaluative judgments that confer status on local residents. The labeling is often the result of a social contest among individuals and families of the neighborhood. Individuals of either orientation may coexist in the same extended family. Moreover, decent residents may judge themselves to be so while judging others to be of the street, and street individuals often present themselves as decent, while drawing distinctions between themselves and still other people. There is also quite a bit of circumstantial behavior—that is, one person may at different times exhibit both decent and street orientations, depending on the circumstances. Although these designations result from much social jockeying, there do exist concrete features that define each conceptual category, forming a social typology.