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## Introduction

### Why Can't We Just Get Along?

One spring morning in 2005, I contacted a high school principal in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles about the possibility of doing research with teen girls at her school. By coincidence, a large fight broke out at noon that day on the school campus. Over the lunchtime break, hundreds of Armenian and Latino students, almost exclusively boys, battled each other in the center of campus, where their segregated turfs met. The LA Police Department was summoned, the school was locked down, and the students were allowed to leave only under police escort in groups of two or three after the police finished a weapons sweep several hours later. Thrown trash cans, scattered litter, and the mess of hurled food—from milk to chicken patties to bananas—left the school campus in complete disarray. Fearing retaliatory fighting—a false fear as it turned out—hundreds of students stayed away from school the next day, and a mostly regular routine then quickly reestablished itself.

This fight was not the first racial brawl in this school's history, and the city of Los Angeles had witnessed several highly publicized race riots that year, from South Los Angeles to the San Fernando Valley. That same spring, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) released data showing that campus hate crimes had surged in the previous decade by over 300 percent; most were race related. School officials claimed that better reporting contributed to the growth in hate crime numbers, but

they also conceded that racial tension and violence were major problems in the nation's second largest school district. José Huizar, then the president of the Board of Education (and now a city council member), suggested that a new era of heightened racial tensions in LA schools had begun, and he tied these tensions to the city's welfare: "The bigger question is, is this a prelude to what the city of Los Angeles will be facing in the next five to ten years—these same types of issues on the city streets? We need to help them deal with the issues at schools or the city has to prepare itself" (quoted in Boghossian and Soddors 2005). That warning, of course, recalls the memorable 1992 LA Riots and 1965 Watts Riots, which were both sparked by racial tensions with police. The city's history and urban geography are intimately entwined with racial violence. Huizar's urgent warning brings that context to the schools. To him, fixing school racial violence is the frontline struggle for ensuring peaceful urban futures. I came to see that youth make similar connections between school fights and the prospects for race relations in both the city and the nation.

The high school principal returned my e-mail inquiry that same day. Surprisingly, she made no mention of the riot; she merely consented to the project, which set me loose on campus to recruit interviewees. After I received final approval from my university's Institutional Review Board, I arranged to visit the school; the front office staff gave me a campus map and pointed me in the direction of a classroom where I had been offered a pulpit to explain my research goals to the students. There were no security precautions, and I met with no administrators. The administration at that time was not overly anxious, although that situation may have since changed. Since that violent spring, LAUSD has allocated over \$4 million for new security officers for its secondary schools.

Part of my pitch to the students was a brief—and, I hoped, enticing—lesson on social geography. I talked about place, identity, and migration—topics that the vast majority of them could easily relate to since, overwhelmingly, they were first- or second-generation Americans. The students were relieved to have a change in routine for the day and quickly engaged with me about the importance of geography for a person's sense of her or his place in the world. My presentation was brief, however, and I had only a short conversation with them before I distributed the fliers and left.

The real lessons came after I spoke to twenty-six girls over the next two months about what became known as simply "the riot," and about school life and race relations, geography, identity, and migration. The riot predictably took center stage in these interviews. Each girl, across all racial identities, denounced the outbreak of racist violence at the school and adamantly called for multicultural understanding and peaceful coexistence at school. In 1992, Rodney King, the famous victim of LA police brutality, implored Angelinos in

the bloody aftermath of his aggressors' acquittals, "Can we get along?" But the girls reinterpreted this refrain and struggled instead with the issues, feelings, and other people who stood in the way of racial harmony. This book attempts to answer the question "Why can't we just get along?"

## The Effects of Banal Multiculturalism on American Girlhood

My aim is to interrogate the subjectivity of girls by exploring the themes of multiculturalism, school segregation, sexuality, race and ethnicity, family life, migration, and girls' struggles with an urban educational system that they think has abandoned them. As a feminist geographer, I draw particular attention to the spaces of girls' identities and daily practices. Like many schools in multiracial U.S. cities, this particular high school's campus is dramatically marked by racial segregation. There are few liminal spaces for integrated socializing. The spaces of segregated urban education are no mere backdrops to youth violence, however, and I show the importance of accounting for the active production and maintenance of such contexts. Racism and sexism are defined through everyday spatial interactions and contexts, and space contours the possible responses to segregative tendencies of girls. The most important spaces to the girls I interviewed are school niches and territories (including those shaped by multicultural education), public urban consumption spaces, families, and homes.

Many of the girls are first- or second-generation Americans, and their global and national space making mark significance beyond their immediate contexts; the space of school violence extends far beyond their school campus (see Holloway et al. 2010). Geography can offer vital insight for educators seeking an end to racial violence in urban schools. Perhaps understanding the spaces of youth subjectivity will help to interrogate consumerist multiculturalism as the "fix" to local urban segregation. To youth, the school is as much a global and familial space as it is a local place to meet friends and get an education. Simplistic prescriptions that are focused merely at the local—or on the body of a girl or a boy—fail to address challenges that require a much wider geographic lens (see Holloway et al. 2010; Ansell 2009a; Evans 2008; Holt and Holloway 2006; Jeffrey and McDowell 2004; Katz 2004; Nayak 2003a; Aitken 2001a, 2001b; Holloway and Valentine 2000). Focusing on schools as the frontline struggle of peaceful urban futures neglects that spatial complexity and places even more responsibility on youth to overcome their intimate, emotional, and material geographies. The girls' family stories about place and national belonging, their struggles with generational change through migration, and their self-evaluations within the constraints of American white hegemony illustrate how these teens acculturate to idealized girlhood,

even though they do not nearly approximate its white, feminine, middle-class embodiment.

The girls themselves did not understand racial and school conflicts within this complex geography. Instead, they vociferously pointed to boys' fighting as the cause of the riot, repeatedly calling it "stupid." Yet I argue in this book that this reproach and the girls' desire to get along mask their own investments in racial, class, and gender-sexual differences and hierarchy. As they pleaded for racial harmony, sometimes in the very next breath, the girls also overwhelmingly articulated racist resentment and detailed their markedly segregated social practices at home, at school, and in the city. With few exceptions, the Armenian, Latina, Filipina, and African American girls I met did not have close friendships with girls outside their own race or ethnicity. Those who did have friends of other races or ethnicities did not visit each other's home or get together in the city beyond the school campus. Out of the twenty-six girls I met, I encountered only two exceptions.

The girls detailed their racism by describing others in terms of their body odor, unpropitious femininity and sexuality, scary masculinity, below-the-belt fighting tactics, unfair government aid and preference, and easier national belonging after immigration. In turn, the girls depicted the poor treatment they felt that they constantly received from others. "Getting along" was an easy and persistent fantasy, but it became harder and harder for me to see it as a practical motivation for easing the ills of racial tension at the school. Racial epithets, misogyny, distrust, and emotional-economic resentment were more common themes from the girls' daily lives. Throughout my interviews, despite what I heard as loud and pervasive racism in their narratives, the girls insisted that they were always the victims of racism, never the perpetrators. They were largely unaware of the racist and misogynist beliefs often embedded in their own stories because they time and again repeated this heartfelt question: "Why can't we just get along?" Yet oblique racism is deeply instructive. The mutual commitment to postracial space, where everyone is equal and happily coexists, and racist differentiation, where no one admits culpability and feels deep resentment to others while also feeling deeply wounded by others, illustrates something important about the range of possible selves in contemporary times (see Brown 1996, 2006). These American selves are intimately framed through banal multiculturalism and the fantasy that America is a postracial society.

I use the word *banal* as a qualifier to indicate that multicultural programming has become rote in many public high schools, while its purposes are unexplained and uncontextualized to students. While Maria Lugones and Joshua Price (1995: 103) suggest that such forms of multiculturalism result in an appreciation of diversity without an *effect* on other cultures, I suggest, to the contrary, that the effects of everyday saturation of uncritical banal multiculturalism are palpable (see also Ahmed 2010; Fortier 2008). Multiculturalism

shapes contemporary forms of racialization and racial identifications; it racializes subjects within a narrow definition of cultural expression. Some even argue that banal multiculturalism actually exacerbates conflicts by stoking the fires of racial-ethnic resentment (Lustig 1997). Rarely do public urban high schools, either through curricular or extracurricular programs, approach the difficult issues of ongoing social, racial, and economic inequality and questions of privilege in the United States (Gillborn 2005; see also Roberts, Bell, and Murphy 2008). Public schools do not systematically teach students about the trenchant racism and the economic disparity that fuel racial-ethnic differences and segregation (Fordham 1996). Such a focus would indicate a radical shift in U.S. education policy and practice that currently emphasizes standardization and neoliberal school accountability—not to mention status quo social, political, and capitalist systems, which are reflected in part by the tracking of students (Stearns 2004; Perry 2002). Critical multiculturalism—that is, multiculturalism that contends that only profound social, economic, and political change will bring about the achievement of diversity and equality—has had only limited impact in urban U.S. high schools.

Compounding the banal multiculturalism of American education is a dominant consumer economy that teaches today's young women to celebrate (and purchase) their femininity and gender strength (Deutsch and Theodorou 2010; Zaslow 2009). Postfeminism emphasizes individualized gendered agency, yet its facile investment in girl power leaves young women responsible for fixing the same disempowering structures of difference that also give them their identities (Charlton 2007; Gonick 2006; Currie 1999). As "girls with power," they are told that they can be feminine *and* fight misogyny, even though femininity is thoroughly defined through misogynist foundations. Postfeminism also implies that girls and young women can redirect cultural forms and products away from the inequities of capitalism or the imprint of sexism and misogyny (McRobbie 2009). Girl power itself is largely framed around middle-class consumption and white hegemonic ideals of the primacy of a gendered agency not marked by color (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005). Thus, both dominant and banal forms of multiculturalism and postfeminism insist that girls have pride in their gender-sexualities, race, and ethnicities. Yet both insist that youth assimilate to white hegemonic standards of success, comportment, and citizenship, especially in educational spaces. Both emphasize the responsibility of the individual girl, and both fail to situate the girl within multiple structures of exploitation and status quo education (Hey 2009; Lee 2005). These conflicting messages help to explain how the girls call for racial belonging with a strong feminine voice: "Boys are stupid; why can't we just get along?"

On the other hand, a simple rebuttal of these messages risks placing responsibility for fixing racism on youth. Accusing girls, especially girls who

are racial-ethnic minorities in the United States, of racism is a difficult indictment for me to make—both personally and politically. As a feminist and anti-racist scholar, I do not want to produce a project that insinuates a “blame the victim” bottom line. Unfortunately, the existing scholarship on American girlhood offers little advice on how to examine racism, segregation, classism, and misogyny among nonwhite girls. The tendency instead is to concentrate on the agency of girls and young women—their ability to “build identities” (Deutsch 2008) and resist negative racialization given white hegemony, poverty, sexism, and heteronormativity (e.g., Sears 2010; Sharma 2010). From this vantage point, girl power’s weighty assumptions suggest that all girls can design new subjectivities for themselves, enjoy their youthful individuality, celebrate multiculturalism, and control the contours of their sexuality—in sum, an agency for self-creation and pleasure however they choose to define these concepts. This tone implies that girls not only have the capacity but also want to choose girlhoods that are racially and sexually progressive, feminist, and optimistic (Gonick et al. 2009). However, clearly not all girls share the sexual politics and antiracism of the feminist scholars who examine their practices.

Saba Mahmood (2005: 7) points out that this sort of predominant feminist notion “locates agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject.” Agency, she argues, must be delinked from liberal feminist assumptions that all subjects are inclined toward progressive politics. Such assumptions are deeply problematic because women and girls do not necessarily desire “to be free from relations of subordination” (10); nor do they necessarily have the capacity for freedom beyond social norms and subordinating structures. Rather, Mahmood asserts, agency is also found “in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms” (15). Her critique is instructive as a counterlogic to girlhood studies of the at-risk, minority girl. When agency is a gendered and racialized potential in the body of a girl, subjectivity is decoupled from subordination. To fit the feminist profile of human agency that Mahmood criticizes, a girl must be able to exert her agency against not only the social forces oppressing her but also the very legibility of her own body.

It is therefore vital that the range of beliefs and practices of girls be considered as much as their resistant accomplishments and possibilities for “future girls” (Harris 2004). Focusing on girls’ agential voices closes down a possible reading of their conservative practices. Both are important, obviously, but situating agency as the organizing analysis in yet another text (i.e., providing another story about girl power) would be an injustice to understanding the lives of these girls, a misreading of their subjectivities, and an illusion that girl power articulated by individual girls can undo oppression. That these girls are not white poses another challenge: how to theorize girls as racist and segregationist while also unburdening them of the individualized “choice” to undo violent American racism and hegemonic whiteness simply through

their own volition. Indeed, personal, social, and spatial constraints mean that the girls' promises of getting along are difficult, if not impossible. Instead, we need a better theory for how girls contend with the powerful mixed messages with which they are barraged in a supposedly postracial and postfeminist but trenchantly extremely racist and sexist America.

### *The Subjects of Girlhood*

Girlhood is burdened by both the responsibility posed by multicultural girl power and the problems and risks of young femininity—of indelible bodies and personalities. The girlhoods of self-harm, alleged growing meanness and delinquency, violently entrenched racial segregation, and sexuality run amok are girlhoods that do not live up to the celebratory promises of girl power, postfeminism, and postracial American diversity. Anita Harris classifies these kinds of girlhoods as “can-do” and “at-risk,” arguing that the intense scrutiny of girls in Western, late modernity indicates an intense anxiety about normalization and its failures. The effects are all too real for girls themselves. The can-do girls get mainstream status with its attendant privileges, while those girls who fail to live up to the promises of a neoliberal economy and a multicultural society must shoulder the blame for succumbing to their risks (2004: 16).

Let's be clear about who these at-risk girls are, particularly in the United States: they are certainly not suburban whites, the middle class, or the upwardly mobile. Moral panic about inner-city and migrant girl gangs, juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy and parenting, or even soulless consumption illustrates the social stakes placed on urban, at-risk girlhood and the pressures that police girls' bodies and punish their transgressions and crimes (see also N. Jones 2010; Miller 2008; Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2004; Alder and Worrall 2004; Aitken 2001b). The overwhelming focus on risk by scholars studying nonwhite girls leads to a narrow examination of the individual, with an intensely local lens and a resulting call to arms to empower girls. Individual psychology displaces an analysis of the constraints of identity and relations of power (Walkerline, Lucey, and Melody 2001: 32; Hey 2009: 22; compare Gagen 2006). Again, this is true of both banal multiculturalism and postfeminism. Fostering positive and prideful racial-gender-sexual identities for girls often becomes the fix for risk.

Unfortunately such a widespread investment in the individual reflects only a victim-hero dichotomy for girls of color. Strong girls are those who can harness a racialized agency to meet their daily hardships. (This agency might even be the ability to “fight back” by learning to counter violence with violence; see N. Jones [2010].) Victimized girls, on the other hand, simply cannot harness racialized agency. The hero-victim dichotomy burdens girls to fix the conditions of their lives, despite the conditions often being far beyond their control.