I WAS INTRODUCED to the principal of the Blair School, an inner-city public school located in the northeast region of the United States, in September 1997. A community activist I had met when I relocated to the area encouraged me to speak with the principal about my ideas of developing a participatory action research (PAR) project with a group of middle-school students aimed at exploring how they negotiate their daily lives within an inner-city community. Mrs. Lawton, an energetic African American principal, was receptive to my ideas and within minutes, introduced me to Mrs. Leslie, an African American science teacher at the Blair School. At the time, Mrs. Leslie was also the homeroom teacher for the students in Homeroom 211. Like Mrs. Lawton, Susan (Mrs. Leslie) was very interested in a collaborative project and invited me outside to meet “her babies.” We stood outside in the school garden—a contained space of soil and seed that is cared for by the sixth-grade students. Susan had spearheaded the creation of the garden many years ago and each year there is a new group of students who rake, plant, weed, and learn the dos and don’ts of growing vegetables, flowers, and other mysterious living matter that appears every season. As we stood near the garden, Susan invited the students to listen to my proposal, reminding me that the decision was up to the students—if they wanted to participate, she and they would commit to every
facet of the project. But if they decided not to participate, she would re-
respect their decision and I would need to investigate other possibilities.

I told the young people a little bit about myself: my experiences grow-
ing up and teaching in an inner-city middle school in Boston; my journey
from teaching in a public school to teaching in a university; and my desire
to collaborate with a group of young people in exploring community is-
issues that were important to them. I also informed the students that I had
recently moved to Ellsworth and that as director of a teaching program at
a nearby university, I wanted to develop linkages between the students at-
tending the university and the young people at the Blair School.

My “pitch” was successful—and so began our collaboration. Using a
feminist (PAR) approach,2 creative techniques (for example, collage mak-
ing, storytelling), community resource inventories, and community pho-
tography, we began a participatory process of investigation and action in
the hope of addressing community issues that were of most concern to the
young people involved in this project.

This book describes that process—a process that has resulted in what
Kohl (1995) refers to as a “radical story.” By that he means a story with
the following characteristics:

• the major force of the story is the community or social group;
• collective action is involved;
• there is an intentional effort to show opposing forces involved in social
struggle and to represent the numerous complexities that get played out in
people’s lives;
• the story illustrates the comradeship as well as the tensions that are created
when groups are engaged in some form of community-building or struggle
or collective endeavor;
• lastly, a radical story has “no compulsory happy ending. . . . There are many
defeats and regroupings, partial victories, new and larger problems to tackle
and a decent world to sustain or build. What characterizes all the stories,
however, is a projection of hope and possibility.” (1995:68)

This book tells a radical story about struggle and possibility, hope and de-
spair, frustration and enthusiasm, victory and defeat with the explicit in-
tention of better understanding the experiences of a group of adolescents
living in an inner-city community and, in response to those experiences,
developing action programs to support and foster youth-initiated strategies for individual and community well-being.

The story of how a group of young adolescents of Color living in an inner-city community moves from dialoguing about issues that concern them to acting on those issues is fraught with confusions, complications, and a host of distractions, all of which can mobilize and/or paralyze a collaborative process. Traditional methods of social science research would not be able to contain the push and pull of conflicting and competing agendas that are inherent in a participatory process. Nor would conventional research paradigms provide a framework for addressing the researcher-participant relationship. Similarly, there would be little room for codeveloping the research process, and positioning activism and consciousness raising within the research experience.

Participatory action research does provide opportunities for codeveloping processes with people rather than for people. It is a counterhegemonic paradigm that emphasizes among other things the promotion of critical self-awareness about one’s lived experiences, building alliances between researchers and participants, a commitment to just social change, the co-construction of knowledge, and “the notion of action as a legitimate mode of knowing, thereby taking the realm of knowledge into the field of practice” (Tandon 1996:21). Although not widely employed by feminists and other researchers in and from the United States (for exceptions, see Brydon-Miller 1993; Lykes 1997, 1994; Maguire 1987, 1993), I chose to explore the idea of developing a project within the context of PAR because it provides opportunities for making important connections between urban youth’s daily lives, their schooling, and the creation of healthy communities. As important, PAR has the potential to create public spaces where researchers and participants can reshape our understandings of how the political, educational, social, economic, and familial contexts that exist in many low-income, inner-city communities mediate the experience of adolescence.

Reframing Urban Youth

I watch the young people participating in the research project described in this book engage their lives like many other adolescents in the United States, with humor, intelligence, introspection, fear, anxiety, a determina-
tion to “be somebody,” and bodies and minds full of energy, creativity, and hope. I also watch them struggle with the multiple issues that are particular to youth of Color living in inner cities and attending inner-city public schools: drug use and abuse, teen pregnancy, violence, “too much trash,” poor housing, lack of resources, and other interlocking systems that marginalize and isolate large segments of young people who are already “losing ground, people whose lives are being determined largely by their inherited place in [the] system” (Finnegan 1998:xix). The system these young people have inherited erects barriers around their lives that often appear insurmountable. Tonesha carries a knife because “there’s crazy people in the world . . . so you have to protect yourself.” Tina doesn’t go out at night “cause in the summertime like if I went out at night, like they start shooting and stuff outside so I have to go in and I can’t go back out.” Bart “runs in the other direction” when he sees gangs walking down the street because “I ain’t gettin’ shot.” Rebecca is “sick of lookin’ at trash. Everywhere we look there is a piece of trash. . . . I see it every day when I go bike riding, driving in a car, or when I take the bus home.” Veronica tries “not to get that many friends ’cause I know I’m about to move, ’cause I moved like six places in three years.”

The challenges these young people face as they negotiate their lives are daunting. Yet it is difficult to dismiss their fate as a foregone conclusion. Although many urban youth live in and with instability, isolation, and various forms of discrimination, the young people described in this book also live with hopes, dreams, the everydayness of school, boys, girls, friends, sex, television, music, and other factors that make up the lives of teenagers. Their stories about life in an inner-city community reveal the various ways in which young people resist, rebel, and recast the constraints of race, social class, and gender—or to be more specific, racism, classism, and sexism.

The participants’ engagement in this PAR project also reveals disturbing information about why and how young urban adolescents resist productive change. Given their history of isolation and marginalization from white, European American society, it is not surprising that young adolescents of Color are cynical about change and, at times, decide to invest their energy into defending themselves against what they perceive as further alienation. On many occasions during the PAR project various participants lost interest, lost hope, switched gears, skipped a session, came back, decided that “hangin’ out” was more attractive than staying after school to
work on a project, and for a host of other reasons “checked out” of the research process. One day, Blood stopped by a group meeting and told me that he couldn’t stay because his mother needed him at home. Five minutes later, Mase told me to look out of the window. “Check him out, Ms. Mac. He ain’t goin’ home to his mama. He’s playin’ basketball.” Another day, we had a very important meeting that required everyone’s attendance. Thirty minutes into the meeting, Tonesha and Monique strolled into the gymnasium drinking sodas, eating chips, and wondering why the rest of us were upset with them. “We were hungry, y’all. And then we was just talkin’ to people on the way.”

There were just as many times when the participants came to the table with energy, hope, enthusiasm, a host of ideas, and concrete plans for how we were going to get from “here” to “there.” Mase grabbed a broom every week and cleaned the classroom in which we had our meetings so that we could “enjoy ourselves and not have to look at junk.” Monique took time out of her day to create fliers on the computer and generated enthusiasm among her peers when she took to the floor with her singing and dancing. Janine was a conscientious secretary, taking notes and keeping us informed on a weekly basis about what we needed to do and when we needed to do it.

It has been my experience working with this group of young people that both their active participation in the PAR process and their determined resistance to various activities were essential to the ongoing processes of reflection and action that characterized this project. When I and the other members of the research team accepted those dynamics and viewed the participants as multifaceted partners in processes of change, great things happened. The “great” things the participants in this project accomplished did not unsettle systems of power and privilege. Nor did their actions dismantle the status quo in any significant way. Yet what the young people did accomplish represents a form of activism and agency that not only contributed to their personal growth but also proved to them, their peers, and the rest of the community that persistent collective effort can lead to change. This change may not shift the social and political landscape in ways that remedy the multiple problems that urban communities confront. Nonetheless, the limited changes that did occur cohered with the participants’ aims and were useful to and for them within the context of the overall research experience.
A Story of Struggle and Possibility

It is important at this juncture to state what this book is not. It is not about university-school-community partnerships, although it clearly reflects how a collaborative relationship might be initiated between interested groups. Nor is it about the intricate relationships that exist between public policy, economic trends, and educational reform, although certainly some parts of the book would suggest that major reforms are needed and necessary, and long overdue. Nor is the book about how schools of education can be more effective in preparing a large number of prospective teachers, counselors, and psychologists, the majority of whom are white and middle class, to work with young people of Color living in inner cities, although there are particular project methods that may be of assistance in that endeavor. Finally, the book is not about how “we” can help “them”—something that too often frames collaborative research projects where university people (outsiders) enter communities to “help” local residents (insiders).³

Instead, this book has two distinct yet interrelated and intertwining aims. The first is to create a space for a group of young adolescents of Color to narrate a story about themselves and their community—a story that presents urban youth as friendly, anxious, hopeful, enthusiastic, resistant, multifaceted people “without erasing the essential features of the complex story that constitutes urban life” (Fine and Weis 1998a:31). I agree with Fine and Weis when they argue that:

Simple stories of discrimination and victimization, with no evidence of resistance, resilience, or agency, are seriously flawed and deceptively partial, and they deny the rich subjectivities of persons surviving amid horrific social circumstances. Equally dreary, however, are the increasingly popular stories of individual heroes who thrive despite the obstacles, denying the burdens of surviving amid such circumstances. (1998a:31)

The second aim of the book is to instill into psychology and education a commitment to activism as a core aspect of participating in research with urban youth. As Pastor, McCormick, and Fine suggest, “Critical insights without opportunities for [people] to reconstruct a world rich in the wonders of race, culture, gender, and social justice may wound a sense of possibility” (1996:29). Urban youth need to be celebrated, showcased, and
presented in ways that are representative of their lives. Equally important, psychologists, educators, and researchers who work with young people in processes of change, need to link our representations, theories, and research to transformative actions that improve the social contexts in which they live. In so doing, we contribute to the well-being of inner-city youth as well as to the elimination of the potholes, detours, barriers, and impediments that inhibit them from gaining access to and being actively engaged in societal opportunities. As Kelley argues, if we really “believe that our [youth] are worth saving and the world is worth remaking,” we must be ready to “look in different places with new eyes” (1997:13). The young people described in this book invite educators, psychologists, and other professionals to read the multidimensional worlds of inner-city youth with “new eyes.” In so doing, we are also invited to move away from a focus on urban youths’ needs, deficiencies, and problems, and to apply our psychological theories and research methodologies to an examination of urban adolescents’ assets, skills, and talents for individual and collective mobilization and resistance.

The book is organized into eight chapters. In chapter 1, I describe PAR, emphasizing the contribution of feminism to PAR’s underlying tenets of investigation, knowledge construction, and action. Given the paucity of literature concerning feminist PAR in education and psychology, and hoping that would-be practitioners will find this book helpful, I thread a detailed description of what constitutes this particular feminist PAR project throughout the manuscript.

In chapter 2, I introduce the research team and the participants, briefly describing the school and the community where the project is taking place. In addition, I describe the information-gathering phase of the project. Participatory action research takes many forms and it is therefore difficult to define the exact parameters of “information gathering.” Similarly, collective investigation, education, and action occur both sequentially and simultaneously within participatory action research. Therefore, although I began with a draft outline of possible phases of the project, events and activities overlapped and did not always occur as planned. I provide examples of how the research team and the participants gathered and constructed information while also developing levels of trust with one another, learning how to participate in decision-making processes, and befriending each other outside the school environment.
The most salient issues that emerged during the first year of the project were the participants’ concerns about violence. In chapter 3, I present their experiences with the multidimensionality of interpersonal violence within the school and community. As the data reveal, the participants’ “discourse of violence . . . sits within a powerful, incisive, and painful social critique” (Fine and Weis 1998b:447). The structural systems the participants have inherited are significant impediments to the efforts to reduce the violence that exists in their environment. Their stories of violence are points of entry into how they—and we—can better understand the impact of violence on young people and, with that understanding, develop realistic strategies for insuring that urban youth can live in a safe environment, succeed in life, and thrive as creative, productive human beings.

The violence the participants describe and experience in their school and community goes beyond the more generally accepted definition of violence as “rough or injurious physical force, action, or treatment” (Webster’s College Dictionary 1996). There is also a preponderance of environmental violence characterized by trash, pollution, graffiti, abandoned houses, and drug paraphernalia in the streets. The participants repeatedly voiced their displeasure about the “trashy way this community looks.” Their descriptions of trash, pollution, and abandoned houses, and their feelings of disappointment, frustration, and resignation over the inability to clean up their neighborhood are examined in chapter 4. I pay particular attention to the community photography aspect of the project that assisted us in broadening our conceptualization of violence to include violations of and to the environment, which, as the participants reveal, have powerful implications for and in their community.

In chapter 5, I move from foregrounding the interpersonal and environmental violence that exists in the participants’ community to highlighting educational violence. I describe the participants’ preoccupation with what it means to “be somebody.” I argue that the participants’ ideas about what it means to “be somebody” is mediated by what Ponder refers to as “educational apartheid”—a system of education that is “supported by covert political and social policies . . . which enact separate developmental expectations for certain groups of students” (1994:1). I embed the discussion of “becoming somebody” in the context of a society that promises young people one thing—an equal education and an opportunity to live
the American dream—and delivers another. Although urban environments may produce heroism in some children as they negotiate difficult terrain, the majority of young people living in inner cities and attending urban public schools are too often “rendered invisible” (Tarpley 1995:3). The reality for many young people of Color, particularly those living in low-income communities, is that the American dream is, as Langston Hughes suggested, “a dream deferred” (1951:62). It is a dream that does not exist for the majority of people of Color, economically deprived whites, and other socially marginalized groups.

In chapters 6 and 7, the book shifts from exploring the worlds of a small group of young adolescents to a description of how we (the members of the research team and the participants) formulated action plans to address the information we had gathered during the first year of the project. Chapter 6 focuses on how we developed a short-term career exploration program to assist the participants in exploring educational and occupational goals that were of interest to them. In chapter 7, I describe the process by which we developed a long-term project called One STEP—Save the Earth Program, which was and is aimed at cleaning up the school and the community. How we arrived at those points in the research process and negotiated the challenge of implementing the action phases of the project are described in both chapters.

Finally, chapter 8 provides a glimpse of where we are today in relationship to the overall research project. I explore the contested spaces of participation and action and discuss the implications of PAR for productive social change. I suggest that PAR can bring about a new way of thinking about what life is like for young people of Color living in an inner-city community. I further argue that it is up to professional educators, community leaders, psychologists, and researchers to act on the insights gleaned from PAR and to take responsibility for initiating new, effective, and transformative ways to engage teaching, learning, and research. As a feminist psychologist and educator, I believe we contribute to feminist psychology, education, and research by engaging in a PAR project that highlights young people’s assets, that refuses to study young people of Color from a deficit model approach, that participates with young people in developing strategies for individual and collective well-being, and that advocates for social change.
(Extra)Ordinary Youth

It is clear from the data that there are “biggg problems” in the participants’ community and that much needs to be done to improve the environment in which they live. At the same time, it is important to support the more positive experiences the participants engage in as they live their daily lives within an inner-city community. The young people play sports with one another, visit relatives both inside and outside the community, hang out at the mall, go to the movies, attend parties, participate in after-school programs, fall in and out of “like” with each other, and generally wrestle with the unpredictability of adolescence. Those experiences, although significant, are not the core foci of this book. One reason for this is because this book is a story about how PAR helped a group of young people address issues and problems that were and are of concern to them. Thus, the majority of our conversations, time, and energy were spent gathering information and taking action about significant aspects of the community that troubled them the most.

The second reason the book focuses on the problematic issues of the participants’ lives is that many white people in this country believe that racial discrimination is no longer a serious problem in the United States and that all young people, regardless of their social positions, have equal access to societal resources. As Hacker suggests, “Most White Americans will say that, all things considered, things aren’t so bad for black people in the United States. . . . Some have even been heard to muse that it’s better to be black, since affirmative action policies make it a disadvantage to be white” (1995:35). This myth that Blacks and other people of Color have it better than whites in our society, or that young people of Color have as many opportunities as young white people do, dismisses the real-life effects of racism, discrimination, poor schools, and lack of societal resources on urban youth. Highlighting stories about how young people play basketball in the courtyard, dance in the school yard, ride bikes to McDonald’s, and stand in line for movie tickets, makes it easier for many white people who do not live in low-income urban communities to think that these young people are unaffected by the disturbing social contexts in which they live.

One night, a group of us went out for pizza at a neighborhood restaurant. We were having a great time, laughing, playing a game called “Name
the Capitals of the United States,” and discussing who had the best pizza, the coldest drinks, and the most delicious desserts in the city of Ellsworth. In the midst of multiple across-the-table conversations, Blood looked over at me and softly said, “I wish I could stay here all night and just eat pizza. That way, I wouldn’t have to walk through the drug dealers on my way into my building.” I told him he could eat pizza as long as he liked and that I would make sure he arrived home safely.

I enjoy spending time with the participants at an amusement park, the university, eating pizza at a restaurant, taking a walk to McDonald’s, and going to a basketball game. Those experiences are important to me, and to them, and have been invaluable in our efforts to learn to trust one another. Yet, in order to create spaces for addressing problematic issues so as to effect change it is equally important that we spend time identifying aspects of urban life that interfere with the participants’ ability to relax, enjoy their adolescence, and be free from worry and fear.

Michelle Fine (1998a) argues that it is not enough for those of us with varying degrees of power and access to gain access for others. She argues that we need to, and must, transform structures, communities, schools, and other contexts as well. The young people described in this book help us to think about how we can expand theories, rethink methodologies, and as important, transform environments. They also challenge us to “step into the complicated maze of experience that renders ‘ordinary’ folks so extra-ordinarily multifaceted, diverse, and complicated” (Kelley 1994:4).