Introduction:
Who’s Responsible for Kids?

In June 1999, recently elected Mayor Jerry Brown visited a Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) meeting in an elementary school auditorium at the eastern edge of Oakland, California’s sprawling flatlands. Speaking to approximately fifty, mostly African American, middle-class homeowners, Mayor Brown detailed his plans for revitalizing the city, “When I talk to people everywhere in Oakland, they are concerned about crime and schools.” Crime rates were declining, but “not fast enough.” He knew that Oakland’s citizens disagreed on how to respond; some at the meeting took “an overtly hard line on crime” while others focused on economic development, improving schools, or building after-school programs. When Mayor Brown opened the meeting for questions, an African American woman in her mid-thirties asked if the city had a plan to reduce juvenile crime. Mayor Brown mentioned new funding to open recreation centers longer, and then added, “Facilities are full. Even to be arrested and held, youth have to pass a test. So it is hard to discipline youth.” The woman explained that she was thinking more in terms of prevention, remarking, “Locking them up doesn’t work.” Mayor Brown agreed: “That’s our paradox. We’ve got to do something, but building facilities doesn’t work. So what do we do?”

Talk about Oakland’s present and future almost invariably turned into a discussion about youth, who seemed to simultaneously embody both the city’s crises and its hopes for change. After briefly responding to an unrelated question, Mayor Brown returned to this topic: “I don’t believe that I’ve answered this woman’s question,” he said.

Prevention is an environment where young people are respected as well as disciplined. It is very hard for the state and the city to take the lead on prevention. First you need the family, then relatives, and then maybe the neighborhood. If we have to go to institutions, it’s not going to work
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so well. First of all, those institutions are not well funded. The rich don’t want to pay for funding those kinds of programs. And there is no lobby to prevent crime, only to build prisons and lock people up. Schools are important, as are after-school programs, but schools can never be entirely responsible. Basically you are on your own . . . These things are broken down for a number of reasons. One is that we live in a whole culture that requires there to be a bottom 5 to 10 percent that fails. We are in a system that generates failure as the flip side of success. All we can do is work block by block. There is no pie in the sky, no magic bullet. If there was, I would have discovered it as governor. I don’t want to propose that the city government can solve all that.

Mayor Jerry Brown and the African American community activists at this meeting struggled with a basic problem: many of the structures that supported kids coming of age were crumbling, and the future of too many of Oakland’s children seemed in doubt. This meeting highlighted significant debates over how the city should respond. What had caused things to “break down”? Were young people’s problems caused by broken families or by racial exclusions and a dearth of economic opportunities? Were Oakland’s children endangered or had they become dangerous themselves? Could the city and state help? Or were Oakland residents left on their own, forced to solve the urgent crises facing children by working “block by block”? This book explores the politics of youth in Oakland at the turn of the twenty-first century, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with Oakland residents who struggled to shape the city’s responses to dangerous and endangered youth. It investigates how these debates over the nature and needs of young people have fundamentally reshaped politics in the contemporary United States.

Youth is a concept that is “good to think with.” A liminal category betwixt and between childhood and adulthood, “youth” offers a way for adults to think about social change, about the past and the future. Oakland residents narrated complex historical changes by comparing their memories of childhood to childhood today. But young people also served as powerful symbols of the city’s and the nation’s future. The presence of wealthy, overprotected children living mere blocks from desperately poor kids seemed to challenge both the ideal of equal opportunity and the future of America’s democracy. College graduates overburdened with debt, living at home, and looking for stable work confounded assumptions about successful transitions to adulthood. Teenage boys dealing drugs or gunned down on the corner challenged
ideals of childhood innocence and highlighted our failures to ensure a safe and secure future for all our children.

Youth today call to mind a troubling set of images: kids failing school or falling behind, “babies having babies,” gang members, and school shooters. These images don’t begin to capture the complexity of barriers facing young people in America. Instead, they “objectify and reify young people as the problem in itself.” Moral panics about drug use, teen pregnancy, and crime have distorted our images of youth and our public policy responses at the turn of the twenty-first century. We are afraid for “our own kids” but deeply fearful of “other people's children.” This distinction between endangered and dangerous maps complex racial, class, and gender divides in contemporary U.S. cities. Understanding the politics of youth requires careful attention to these intricate connections. We must explore the stories we tell about kids, the images we use, and the impact of both on the ways we draw the boundaries of our political community.

We usually think of children and youth as outside of politics. Kids can't vote and most are excluded from the public realm of work. We often assume that children belong in the private sphere, in the domain of family, and not in the public realm where citizens struggle over power, resources, and the role of government. But feminist scholars have challenged this common distinction between private and public, between the “soft messy stuff of everyday life”—like the daily struggles of parents or young people—and the “hard” stuff of economics and politics. Childhood and youth have helped craft the divide between public and private spheres that we think of as a foundational characteristic of modern states. Our shifting ideas of what kids need have reshaped the form of the welfare state throughout the twentieth century. They have also transformed city and suburban spaces. Geographer Leslie Miller argues that the idea of “dangerous streets” and “safe homes” was constructed alongside the idea of fragile, innocent children who of course “belonged” in those private homes in the late nineteenth century. Our ideals of childhood and youth have repeatedly restructured the way we draw the boundaries between public and private responsibility, public and private space, and what counts as the proper realm of politics.

Considering youth and politics together changes the story we tell about urban America and the broad political and economic shifts that have swept the nation at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Understanding these changes requires that we explore social reproduction: all the messy work that must be done to raise and educate the next generation of workers. Children have certainly been affected by growing economic
insecurity and a retreating and increasingly punitive welfare state. But children also serve as powerful symbols (and sometimes actors) in politics. As such, they have helped to shape contemporary political and economic transformations.\(^5\)

The question “Who is responsible for children?” is fundamentally a political question. Young people need many kinds of care: physical care to keep them safe, fed, and dressed; love and emotional support; guidance to help them make the transition to adulthood; education and training to provide them with the skills and capacities to thrive as workers and citizens. So who does this work of social reproduction? Parents (often mothers) are the easy, default answer in many contemporary political debates. But parents don’t do their vital work in a vacuum. Many institutions, spaces, and policies shape children’s lives and futures and enable or constrain parental investments in children.\(^6\) Schools, parks, playgrounds, and recreation centers are important spaces for children’s development. So are neighborhoods, where children walk and play, form friendships, get guidance from other adults, and develop their own social networks. Government actions (or inactions) affect all these spaces for children. State funding for schools, zero tolerance policies, and security practices have reshaped children’s daily lives in Oakland’s classrooms and hallways. Federal housing policies and local urban redevelopment practices have produced wealthy, mostly white neighborhoods and devastatingly poor black and Latino neighborhoods. State and federal governments also establish taxation policies, the minimum wage, parental leave policies, discrimination laws, and social safety nets that shape the resources, even the time, families and children have together. The state literally acts as the parent for children in foster care and the juvenile justice system, deciding where children will live, with whom, and how they will be punished. In these diverse ways, the state plays a significant role in shaping children’s lives, their paths to adulthood, and the very categories of child and youth.\(^7\)

America has become a nation of radically unequal childhoods.\(^8\) We tolerate the highest child poverty rates of any industrialized country, though we are the wealthiest nation in the world. Economic inequalities have grown in the last three decades, concentrating wealth at the top, eroding the middle class, and condemning many families to the growing ranks of the working poor. Kids born poor are likely to become poor adults—a fact that makes a mockery of our national commitment to the ideal of equal opportunity.\(^9\) Schools more often reflect existing racial and class inequalities than provide a secure path to the middle class. We now incarcerate so many poor children that the Children’s Defense Fund has begun to fight against what it calls the
“cradle-to-prison pipeline.” These policies have racial effects, and to some degree racial causes, despite widespread claims that race no longer matters. Black and Latino children are more likely to grow up poor and more likely to be incarcerated than white and most Asian kids. These inequalities have raised fundamental questions about the meaning of race and class in the post–civil rights era, an era that has seen expanding opportunities, lingering inequalities, and new barriers for black kids coming of age.

This book chronicles race and the politics of youth in Oakland and the debates among parents, community activists, politicians, policy makers, and youth activists about how to respond to these deep racial and class divides in young people’s lives. The pervasive image of black youth crime placed black boys in the spotlight of Oakland politics. This book does likewise, concentrating on fears of and fears for black boys and tracing the urgent dilemmas of black parents and activists as they worked to secure safe passage to adulthood for black children. But it also explores the more complex intersections of race, class, and gender that characterized politics in Oakland. The stories and struggles of activists in this one city help us address two broad questions that face the nation: Why does the United States tolerate such inequalities in children’s lives? And what kind of politics would be required to create equal-opportunity childhoods?

**Children in a War on Dependence**

Mayor Jerry Brown’s speech embodied many principles of what scholars call neoliberal governance. He encouraged individuals and communities to govern themselves and defined government as almost powerless to solve the deep crises facing Oakland’s children. His speech echoed the commonsense claim that “government can’t raise children,” as he characterized the state in narrow terms as a set of badly funded “institutions.” Ultimately he asserted that families and neighborhoods had to reconstruct spaces and networks of care for children “on their own”—although he momentarily embraced the state’s responsibility for protecting citizens from “dangerous youth.” Jerry Brown’s limited vision of government responsibility stemmed from his own struggles to govern Oakland in the context of massive economic inequalities and significant changes in our ideas about government and in the structure of the state.

Many scholars have explored how the state and state power have been reconfigured in a rapidly globalizing world. “The state” includes the representative political bodies and bureaucracies of local, state, and national gov-
ernments that make and implement laws and policies. But the state is not “a disembodied or reified object” or just a set of policy-making institutions that “somehow sits above the fray of everyday life.” Rather, the state is “a set of relationships” that are “enacted through the practices of social agents” (teachers, police officers, social workers, politicians, community activists) at work, at home, and in neighborhoods. The state is also a powerful and contested idea: What is the role of government?

Since the late 1970s, conservative attacks on “big government” and the “nanny state” have radically challenged and transformed the welfare state that was built up during the New Deal in the 1930s and Great Society in the sixties. Democratic and Republican administrations alike embraced free market ideologies and borrowed market models to reconfigure state institutions. State and federal governments cut taxes, reduced regulations, and curtailed spending for many health and welfare services. They transformed many federal entitlement programs (like Aid to Families with Dependent Children) into block grants administered by the states, creating a devolved and decentralized state in which private for-profit and non-profit agencies provide most social services. Historian Michael Katz argues that a “war on dependence” helped drive these neoliberal changes in state policy and practice. “Reliance for support on someone” has been redefined as “failure.” Neoliberal policies encourage individual citizens and communities to act like entrepreneurs, reliant on themselves and not “dependent” on government. Welfare reform embodies this critique most clearly: single mothers are no longer supposed to depend on the state but instead are expected to embrace the “independence” the job market offers. This war on dependence has extended deep into the social fabric, encouraging individuals to invest in their own retirements instead of depending on employee pensions and calling for citizen volunteers to provide services once provided by government.

Neoliberal governance has not reduced state power, despite calls for small government. The rise of law-and-order politics has expanded the state’s “power to punish.” As anthropologist Roger Lancaster has argued, punitiveness is the “real cultural logic” of neoliberalism. The U.S. prison population has skyrocketed in the last twenty years, tripling between 1987 and 2007, when one out of every one hundred Americans was behind bars. Children have not been immune to the rise of penal governance. A fearful public has increasingly defined youth—especially poor black and Latino young men—as dangerous thugs and gang members. All states now allow children under eighteen to be tried as adults, and the United States is the only industrial-
ized nation that sentences children to life without the possibility of parole. California now spends roughly as much on the prison system as on higher education. These punitive public policies have decimated families and many children’s life chances. But the punitive logic of criminal justice has also extended deeply into neighborhoods and schools, where they have reshaped our ideas of both childhood and the state. Sociologist Loïc Wacquant argues that an emerging “penal common sense” is redefining the central right of citizenship as the right to sufficient police protection.

These neoliberal policies have created new crises of care for children and deep inequalities in childhood. Children are not autonomous agents acting in the marketplace, but by definition children are dependents reliant on adults for care. So what happens to children during a “war on dependence”? The human costs of neoliberal governance were particularly evident in Oakland’s schools and neighborhoods, where poor families struggled to maintain stable housing, many middle-class families only clung precariously to their economic status, children attended schools without textbooks, and the drug war destroyed families and locked up a shocking number of the city’s young black men. As Michael Katz has argued, cities in the 1980s and 1990s “could not displace misery onto other levels of government; the devolution of responsibility ended in their streets.”

Many innovations of neoliberal governance were forged in the crucible of cities like Oakland, which struggled to respond to the escalating needs of children and families with a limited tax base and declining state and federal funds. Jerry Brown’s call for neighbors to work block by block highlights one of the central characteristics of neoliberal urban governance: an increased reliance on volunteers and community partnerships to provide basic government services. Oakland’s community policing initiative called for the city’s residents to become partners with the police in order to create safe and orderly neighborhoods. The city’s schools relied on parent volunteers as a source of funding and a vital part of daily operations. Nonprofits, funded by an unstable combination of government and foundation grants, provided a growing portion of city services for children and youth.

Each of these partnerships opened up opportunities for Oakland’s activists to shape the policies and practices of local government. Community policing activists gained some power to shape police priorities and some leverage to transform the historically tense relationship between black communities and the police department. Parents worked with children’s advocacy groups and an expanded nonprofit sector to increase public funding for youth development and after-school programs. And, contrary to Jerry Brown’s claims,
they created a “lobby to prevent crime.” But these different new partnerships also reshaped the way neighborhood activists framed their political identities and interests. Public-private partnerships sometimes redefined ideas about what youth needed and created urgent dilemmas for community activists. How could the police make neighborhoods safe for black kids who themselves were usually the target of police sweeps? How could activists expand public investments in children at a moment when free-market ideologies had decimated progressive taxation policies that might fund equal-opportunity childhoods? How could they win support for state investments in children from a fearful public that defined youth not only as endangered innocents but also as dangerous and unworthy?

**Race and the Politics of Youth**

Children and youth serve as important symbols in conflicts over how to reconstruct the state in the current global economic order. Yet their role in both forging and contesting neoliberal governance has been underappreciated. This book responds to recent calls to look at neoliberalism not as a unified ideology imposed from the top down but as a process shaped significantly at the local level. We need to explore the complex social and political processes, the multiple agents and interests, that drive changing regimes of urban governance. Fears of youth and fears for youth motivated many activists in Oakland. The ways they framed the needs and problems of young people shaped the visions of the state they promoted and the kinds of state action they tried to secure.

“Youth” has long been a “slippery concept” invested with adult hopes but also seen as potentially and unpredictably dangerous. It is a flexible identity that can only be defined in relation to the opposing categories “child” and “adult.” The meaning and referents of youth change in different historical, cultural, and political contexts. Child, boy, girl, teen, youth, young man, adolescent, woman, and adult are not natural categories. They are laden with dense cultural meanings that have varied globally and throughout U.S. history. From the midnineteenth century to the midtwentieth, children went from being defined as useful workers to becoming the “useless” but “sentimentally priceless” focus of middle-class family life. Most modern industrialized societies began to emphasize not only children’s innate innocence, vulnerability, and capacity for change but also their incompetence and lack of cultural knowledge or moral responsibility. “Adolescent” in the early twentieth century and “teenager” in the 1950s evoked other complex meanings:
idealism, exuberance, and rebellion, but also irrationality, delinquency, raging hormones, and susceptibility to peer pressure. When and how a child becomes an adolescent or an adult has shifted over time, as has what we think children need in order to thrive. Do kids need free play or 24-hour education? Do they need full-time care from stay-at-home mothers or preschool and after-school programs outside of the home? Do they need meaningful work or to be removed entirely from the workforce? Do they need physical discipline or affection, care or control? Can they play in the street or should they play in more structured and supervised spaces? Do they need to be kept in “troubled homes” or removed from the influence of problematic parents? Americans don’t all give the same answers today, and our public policies suggested different responses over the course of the twentieth century.

These mobile categories compel us to pay close attention to the ways community activists and policy makers talk about youth. As anthropologist Mica Pollock explains, talk is “an everyday action that shapes the world as it describes it.” Debates over the nature and needs of young people carry cultural weight and political consequences; they are “acts and interventions” in a political field. If we describe young people in the juvenile justice system as “children,” we frame them as not fully responsible and inherently reformable. However, if we describe them as “thugs,” their future is already determined and the possibilities and protections of childhood are foreclosed. We may as well treat, and punish, them as adults.

Youth have often served as fertile ground for the proliferation of neoliberal ideologies of self-help and privatized family values in Oakland and across the United States. The idea that children belong in the private realm of the family could easily reify a narrow idea of family responsibility and the notion that the government cannot (and should not) help. Images of dangerous youth often justified efforts to control, contain, and exclude young people from Oakland’s schools and streets. They reified the idea that youth needed discipline, not care or education, and promoted an idea of the state as a disciplinary father with expansive powers to police and regulate young people’s behavior in urban spaces.

But children and youth also remained particularly powerful symbols for political projects that aimed to reconstruct a social safety net. Children’s advocates and youth activists in Oakland used commonsense understandings of children as vulnerable and in need of adult protection to fight against the privatization of social responsibility for children and to secure new sources of funding for youth development. Youth activists similarly used the state’s role as parent to challenge the incarceration of children.
On a national level, the Children’s Defense Fund, as well as Hillary Clinton’s book *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child*, tried to reclaim the progressive potential of the politics of childhood. In each of these cases, advocates used the dependence and innocence of children and youth to argue for state investments in social reproduction. Because neoliberal ideologies of choice, accountability, and self-governance falter when applied to kids, childhood may offer the most viable space for citizens to call for large-scale social programs and to bring questions of care and the social back into our political vocabulary. Indeed, children and youth may be the only legitimate dependents left as neoliberalism has defined dependency as the ultimate failure of citizenship.

Race intersects with the politics of youth in important ways in twenty-first-century America. Not all children today have equal access to the symbolic power of childhood innocence and dependency. Youth of color, particularly black boys and girls, have long been linked with other symbolic associations—criminality or sexuality—that have undermined their ability to make claims on the state. As historian Jennifer Ritterhouse documents, white southerners in the Jim Crow era “rarely saw any but the very youngest black children as innocents or extended the ideal of the sheltered childhood to blacks.” Black parents had to train their children to survive in a racially structured world in which the “wrong” look or comment could lead to a white mob lynching, as it did with fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. On a national level, while Franklin Roosevelt declared an “end to child labor” in 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act pointedly excluded agriculture and domestic service from the new regulations. The largely black and Latino children who worked in those industries were not considered children worthy of protection.

The post–civil rights era certainly led to improvements in the lives and life chances of many black children. But an increasingly punitive state and the racialization of youth crime created new barriers and urgent problems. Since the late 1960s, black youth crime has worked as what legal theorist Patricia Hill Collins calls “a controlling image” both in Oakland and in American politics more broadly. It focused black political action on the predicaments of black boys, often marginalizing attention to black girls. But it has had much broader political effects as well. Racially coded images of ghetto youth have produced support for punitive public policies that treat boys as adult-like criminals in the nation’s schools, streets, and justice system. They have built support for shrinking state spending for social supports while making spending on police and prisons seem absolutely necessary.
Community activists in Oakland expressed two apparently contradictory concerns about young people coming of age: children were growing up too soon, but some adult “children” never grew up. Childhood seemed to be shrinking, even disappearing, for some kids at the same time it was lengthening for others. These anxieties highlight deep disruptions in childhood and adulthood as stable, taken-for-granted, “natural” categories at the start of the twenty-first century.

Neoliberal economic shifts and state policies changed the idealized path from dependent childhood to independent adulthood that emerged in the post–World War II era when an expanding economy helped produce a relatively “orderly” transition to adulthood for most young people in the United States. Back then, youth would finish their education (often just high school), get a full-time job, move out of their parents’ home, marry, maybe buy a home, and then start their own family. Not all young people followed that linear path, but it remained the norm against which most deviations were measured. Today the path to adulthood has many more detours and roundabouts. Economic insecurity and extended education mean that many young people leave home at later ages and remain semidependent on their parents far into their twenties, if not beyond. News features and self-help books on “the mid-mid-life crisis,” “boomerang kids,” and “boys who never grow up” document our struggle to understand these delayed transitions to adulthood. Scholars have called this new reality “emerging adulthood,” and some developmental psychologists now argue that adolescence extends to the midtwenties.

Changing state policies over the last thirty years have also redrawn the boundaries between childhood and adulthood in contradictory ways. On the one hand, the United States has created an ever-expanding culture of child protection. Raising the drinking and smoking age and cracking down on statutory rape, the state has extended childhood as a protected status into and beyond the teenage years. On the other hand, get tough on crime policies have led to a radical shrinking of childhood as jurisdictions around the country prosecute younger and younger children as adults. Yet young people have not experienced these shifts equally. The material basis for what geographer Susan Ruddick calls “democratized adolescence” had become profoundly frayed. The category of youth itself seemed to split along racial and class lines in Oakland: poor kids, often kids of color, grew up too soon, while the protected children of the middle class never grew up.
Law and order politics has helped to codify new racial exclusions from childhood. Since the 1970s, white and middle-class youth have been removed from the juvenile justice system, their problems increasingly medicalized and treated in an expanding private system of mental health facilities. At the same time, and not coincidentally, punishments have significantly increased for the largely black and Latino poor kids left in the public system. California Proposition 21, the Gang Violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Act, epitomized this get tough on youth trend. Scared by mass media reports of gang violence, voters passed Proposition 21 in 2000 even though youth crime was at a twenty-year low. The ballot initiative increased penalties for a wide range of juvenile offenses, enhanced penalties for alleged gang members, and, most controversially, gave prosecutors the authority to try kids over fourteen as adults for any felony crime, including nonviolent ones. Between 1985 and 1997, the number of youth incarcerated in adult prisons more than doubled in the United States. Black and Latino boys are disproportionately charged and incarcerated as adults, excluding them from the category of childhood and the protections of the juvenile justice system. Historian Barry Feld argues that these changes have served as “criminological triage,” separating “our kids,” who are seen as salvageable, from “other people’s kids,” who are framed as irredeemable. These racial inequalities in the criminal justice system have created the popular equation between black boys and criminality that threatens to redefine black boys across class lines as potentially dangerous.

These changes in the path to adulthood have increased fears across racial and class lines, while they have caused an even deeper crisis of social reproduction in black communities. As formal legal barriers to equal opportunities have been torn down, some black middle-class families have prospered as never before. But economic restructuring and criminal justice policies have created shock waves that have destroyed the foundations of many others. New gender fissures have emerged in black communities as more black women prospered while black men’s economic progress stalled. Even black middle-class families have a much harder time ensuring that their children retain a secure foothold in the middle class than do white families. Marita Golden, author of the popular book Saving Our Sons, captures the intensified risk that black boys in particular face as they come of age. For her son Michael, she explained, “the line of demarcation between childhood and adulthood was not a border, but a precipice.”
Oakland’s Divided Landscapes of Childhood

Oakland’s unequal childhoods were written into the city’s physical geography, which runs from the formerly industrial flat plains along the bay up to the tall hills filled with parklands that lie between Oakland and the inland suburbs. The “flatlands” and “the hills” shaped Oakland’s historical development and provided an important lens through which residents interpreted and contested deepening divides in youth. Freeways and boulevards marked both significant symbolic boundaries and real racial and class divides in this terrain. In 2000, in many areas of the East Oakland flatlands, between 27 and 52 percent of households lived below the poverty line, while in the hills above the 580 freeway there were virtually no poor households (See Figure 1).

This geographic divide provided a way to talk about the city’s class exclusions that were racial, but could not be reduced in any simple way to race. Both the hills and the flatlands had become more racially diverse in the post–civil rights era, with an expanding black middle class and rapid Latino and Asian migration. But white residents still predominated in many parts of the hills, while the flatlands remained mostly black, Latino, or Asian (See Figure 2). In Oakland politics at the turn of the twenty-first century, the hills still often served as a symbol for the city’s white elite and the flatlands, for the black masses. This geographic metaphor also provided a flexible way for Oakland residents to debate more complex racial and class inequalities and the contours of political power in the contemporary city.

Fears of youth crime and violence in Oakland conformed to the city’s geography of inequality, with the hills generally coded as safe and the flatlands, especially in East or West Oakland, as dangerous. This general equation of space and danger reified fears of black youth, who were vastly overrepresented in Alameda County’s juvenile justice system. In 2000, while countywide black youth were 20% of the juvenile population, they represented 51% of juvenile arrests, 61% of adjudications, and 65% of institutional placements. This conforms to a nationwide pattern: even when charged with the same offense, black youth were six times and Latino kids three times more likely to be incarcerated than white kids. The disproportionate treatment is cumulative and increases at every stage in the juvenile justice process.

These divided landscapes shaped the politics of youth in Oakland, creating very different coming of age dilemmas and political mobilizations that were structured in complicated ways by race, class, and place. As geographers Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine contend, “geography matters to
the social construction of childhood and in the everyday lives of children.\textsuperscript{62} Oakland’s neighborhoods played a significant role in creating and containing young people’s dreams and opportunities,\textsuperscript{63} but they also shaped the fears and actions of adults as they tried to understand and respond to youth in the city. Oaklanders regularly debated what the divide between the hills and the flatlands meant for children growing up in the city: Was there a ladder of opportunity to the hills for poor kids in the flatlands? Or was the path to the middle class impossibly steep? When people talked about “flatland kids” were they really talking about black kids? What was the significance of race now that the divide between the hills and the flatlands could no longer be seen in simple black-white terms?

These debates about race, place, and youth shed light on the connections between global processes and local places.\textsuperscript{64} As anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff argue, many of the global crises and anxieties created by neoliberal capitalism “congeal in the contemporary predicaments of youth.”\textsuperscript{65} Global economic changes reverberated through Oakland’s homes and neighbor-
hoods. Decisions made at the city, state, or federal levels created patterns of investment and disinvestment that shaped children’s lives. But children and adults in Oakland’s neighborhoods experienced, interpreted, and reworked these global and national processes. These struggles at the local level have generated new techniques of governance, ideas of citizenship, and even concepts of the self that enable new political and economic orders to emerge.

*Oakland’s Complex Racial Politics*

Oakland offers a microcosm of divides in youth, politics, and generation that characterize many American cities. The concerns and findings in this book echo stories that can be heard in many other cities where fears of youth have infected the populace and transformed urban policy making. Think of alleged “wildings” in New York, gangs in Los Angeles, or Chicago’s curfew and loitering laws, which express broad public ambivalence about a younger generation that we have abandoned and now try to contain.66 Or consider

![Race in Oakland, Census 2000](image)

Figure 2. Oakland’s complex geography of race. These maps highlight the ways white populations are concentrated in the hills, while blacks, Latinos, and Asians predominate in the flatlands. But they also show the strong black middle-class presence in the East Oakland hills and lower hills. (Mark Kumler and Diana Sinton, University of Redlands)
the more mundane frustrations adults express in towns and cities all over America when confronted with young people littering or loitering, often wearing clothes or speaking a language adults neither like nor understand. In many ways, Oakland embodies the core contradictions of urban America: racial segregation alongside rising black political power, racial liberalism and deep racial divides, disinvestment alongside gentrification.

At the same time, Oakland has several distinctive features that permit an especially rich exploration of race, class, and youth politics. Oakland is a midsized, historically working-class city that became a primary destination for black migrants during and after World War II. Consequently, Oakland’s racial history and politics, in contrast to those of many other western cities, developed primarily along a black-white binary. Perhaps best known as the birthplace of the Black Panthers, Oakland has long been home to vibrant and diverse strains of black organizing and politics. Entrenched black poverty exists in Oakland, but there is also a substantial, politically powerful black middle class, which complicates the often simplistic equation of race with class or blackness with poverty. The city is home to wealthy black entrepreneurs, doctors, and lawyers who live in the hills, as well as middle-class black homeowners throughout the flatlands, who work as bus drivers, postal workers, or security guards and take enormous pride in their carefully cultivated homes and gardens as symbols of their life’s work. Oakland’s civil rights movement enabled black Oaklanders to amass significant local political power in the 1980s and ‘90s as Oakland became a majority black city. Even though many saw Mayor Jerry Brown’s election as the end of Oakland’s black urban regime, black politicians, civil servants, and community activists retained significant power within city government. In 2001, the city had a black city manager, chief of police, and chief of probation, and black heads of most city departments.

Oakland is also now one of the nation’s most racially diverse cities—so it enables an investigation of how our concepts of race do (and do not) shift as they become less black and white. Latino, Asian, black, and white families—and many that fall neatly into none of those categories—share streets, schools, parks, and bus lines in Oakland. Childhood poverty in Oakland disproportionately affects black, Latino, and Asian children: 34.7% of black children, 33.5% of Asian children, and 26.5% of Hispanic children grew up in poor in 2000, compared to 17.5% of white children. This diversity complicated understandings of race, class, and youth in Oakland at the turn of the twenty-first century even though a black-white binary continued to structure the way many residents thought about race and urban politics.
Oakland is a self-consciously liberal city, which enables us to explore the limits of liberalism, its failures to confront persistent structural racial inequalities, and the dangers of the color-blind ideology that has come to pervade American politics. Oakland is also home to vibrant and competing traditions of community organizing and politics. This means that Oakland politics during Jerry Brown’s tenure as mayor included plentiful voices that challenged emerging forms of neoliberal governance and resisted calls for color blindness, many of which worked to revive Oakland’s long history of protest politics in the face of calls for communities to partner with government to solve the city’s complex problems. But it also means that neoliberal calls for community governance could draw on calls for community control that had been most prominently made by the Black Panthers. Robert Jones, a black parent and neighborhood activist in the Laurel district, explained why “city hall works with its neighborhoods.”

Look at the history of Oakland, when they were not in touch with the neighborhoods, the Black Panthers happened. So I think they found it in their interest to really be listening to their neighborhoods. As opposed to Marxist theory, Lenin’s theory, it happened here. People got guns and revolted. They got guns and went to Sacramento and took the lawmakers hostage. Memories just don’t go away. They are reaching out because they don’t want that to ever happen again.

Studying race and the politics of youth sheds new light on the complexity of contemporary black politics. This book builds on a growing literature in political science and anthropology that explores vibrant traditions of black politics and neighborhood participation. Scholars like Steven Gregory, Adolph Reed, Mary Pattillo, and Michelle Boyd have traced important changes in black politics in the post–civil rights era, exploring how complex transformations in urban political economies have deepened class divides in the ways black activists construct political identities and interests. Black activism in Oakland was reconfigured by the diverse forms of community “partnerships” that have become common in neoliberal cities. These engagements had profound generational as well as class contours. Black elders and middle-class homeowners were integrated into urban governance, working with Oakland’s community policing initiative, volunteering in schools, running local nonprofits, and controlling many of the city’s major city departments. At the same time, black (and Latino) youth and poor families were subjected to an increasingly punitive state apparatus. These very different kinds of relationships with state
institutions helped produce deep generational and class divides in Oakland’s politics. Linking the study of youth and politics sheds new light on the causes and consequences of the profound chasm between the civil rights generation and the hip hop generation.69

Oakland politics complicated the common assumption that fears of youth were solely white middle-class fears of poor black kids. In Oakland, fears of youth were neither confined to the white middle class nor focused solely on black youth. And fears of youth were closely linked to fears for youth who were negotiating an increasingly difficult path to adulthood. Exploring the politics of youth across Oakland’s complex racial and class geography enables us to reconsider a core question in the literature on black politics: Does the fate of the black middle class remain linked to that of the black poor, and if so, does linked-fate politics remain viable?70 It also lets us ask whether contemporary racial and class geographies are creating new linkages that may reconfigure the ways activists construct racial, class, and generational political identities. The politics of youth in Oakland at the turn of the twenty-first century suggests some significant changes in the way we think about race in the post–civil rights era. Race and class remain linked, as do race and space, but far less categorically than before the civil rights movement. Youth has become a racialized category in Oakland that marks the flexible but enduring structures of exclusion in contemporary America.

Oakland’s black communities were not simply victims of urban decline and America’s law and order politics. As Oakland historian Robert Self argues, black community activists have been among “the most thoughtful agents imagining and fighting for remedies to urban crises.”71 Indeed, black activists have been at the forefront of the struggle to forge a new politics of childhood that refuses to abandon some children as irredeemable. These efforts have emerged out of black political organizing and have reshaped long-standing traditions of American maternal politics. These activists may help us to imagine solutions to the fundamental crises facing many young people coming of age in early twenty-first-century America. If we are looking for a road map to create more just policies for the nation’s youth, we need to learn from the urgent dilemmas and substantial roadblocks Oakland’s activists have confronted and the often contradictory public policies they have promoted. As legal scholars Lanier Guinier and Gerald Torres have argued, black communities, in this case black children, may be like canaries in the coal mine.72 They provide a critical warning and a call to national action to address the broad crises facing children and youth in America.
Are You a Reporter? Urban Political Fieldwork

This book draws on ethnographic fieldwork and historical research among Oakland’s “attentive publics” or “community wardens,” the active citizens, young and old, and the politicians and policy makers who shaped the city’s responses to the problems of dangerous and endangered youth. My fieldwork loosely corresponded with Jerry Brown’s two-term tenure as Oakland’s mayor. I spent 1998-2001 conducting research full-time in Oakland, and returned for periodic visits and interviews between 2003 and 2009. As with many ethnographic projects, my research methodology evolved over the course of my fieldwork, following the path of relationships I built with informants, institutional doors that opened or remained shut, and events and controversies, like Proposition 21, that created new spaces for political mobilizations.

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in three neighborhoods across Oakland’s divided geography: a largely black and Latino working-class neighborhood in the East Oakland flatlands where unemployment and high crime rates created urgent crises for young people coming of age; a mixed-income and multiracial lower hills neighborhood where many families struggled to ensure that their children would make it up a steeper and longer path to the middle class; and a wealthy, historically white neighborhood in the high hills where a local public high school brought Oakland’s racial and class divides, past and present, into sharp relief. In each neighborhood, I observed the complex terrain of local politics: the youth groups, PTAs, homeowner’s associations, and community policing councils that tried to shape the city’s responses to the needs and problems of youth. In each neighborhood I conducted fifteen-twenty interviews with activists that explored local history, political networks, and community activism. I followed these activists to city council and school board debates about curfews, cruising, police practices, and juvenile justice policies. To understand the politics of childhood and youth also required that my methodology not reify a distinction between public political realms and the private realms of family, childhood, and parenting, so I explored activists’ memories of childhood and their anxieties about the transition from childhood to adulthood as they raised children. I documented the landscapes of childhood across Oakland’s geography and some of the daily conflicts over where young people belonged—conflicts that took place on street corners, in schools and parks, and in living rooms.

Many of the neighborhood activists were tightly networked into city hall and exerted a significant amount of influence over local policy making. For
historical reasons, black and white activists dominated established political networks in the neighborhoods I studied. Middle-class homeowners were generally the most engaged in neighborhood politics. As Logan and Moltótoch and many others have found, homeowners often exert more power with government and private sector groups. But in Oakland the label “middle class” hides an enormous diversity in how local activists constructed class and racial identities through their political practice. A central question of this study became how Oakland activists constructed racial, class, and generational identities within different political networks. I worked most closely with black political activists and parents in each neighborhood, but I also developed relationships with white, Latino, and Asian activists and parents who participated in interconnected political networks.

I explored several city and county coalitions that brought together government agencies and nonprofits to design strategies to respond to the problem of youth violence in Oakland. Moving through endless planning meetings, I met the nonprofit agency leaders as well as police, probation officers, and other government employees who led youth reform efforts in Oakland. I conducted over fifty interviews with city officials, police, and service providers. I also traced the history of Oakland’s youth reform efforts through archival research in the Oakland library’s history room. Since I needed to support myself financially during much of my fieldwork, I worked on a number of foundation-funded initiatives, which helped me map existing youth programs and Oakland’s political networks. The world of youth service providers was a familiar one since after college I ran youth programs for a neighborhood-based nonprofit in Chicago. Instead of sitting as a silent observer, I participated freely and became “a free brain,” according to one informant in a citywide collaborative. Frustrated by the fragmentation of Oakland’s political networks, I often served as a bridge to bring together organizations or activists working on similar issues. Occasionally I worried that my active participation threatened a preexisting ideal of detached research or a narrow understanding of research ethics, but when I shared that worry with an informant, she reminded me of the inherently dialogic nature of knowledge: “It’s not like we’re some isolated tribe. You don’t have to worry about contaminating our culture.”

There are significant benefits and some drawbacks of studying politics by participating in multiple political networks and associations. These diverse locations helped me to develop a more subtle understanding of how Oakland’s race and class divisions shaped the politics of youth. Moving through different political networks simultaneously, I became aware of multiple cleav-
ages within Oakland’s political culture, divisions between neighborhoods, between city and county service providers, and between youth activist networks and homeowner activists. I could identify which networks were well connected to particular city or county departments and which were largely left out of the corridors of power. But the political networks themselves also limited my research in significant ways. As I traveled from meeting to meeting, I formed the closest relationships with the people who were already deeply embedded in the terrain of local politics and met fewer immigrants, poor parents, and young people except those already engaged in political action. I often got to know the police officers and city officials on the community meeting circuit even better than I knew activists in any one neighborhood. One particularly busy week, a police captain joked that he saw me more than he saw his wife. Following a busy schedule of meetings, I spent less time in the homes of informants and on the streets of Oakland than I would have liked. But my daily routine and my personal networks in many ways matched those of the community activists I studied who spent most afternoons and evenings in community meetings and formed close relationships with other activists in similar political networks.

My own interests as an activist and youth worker also shaped my fieldwork. When I first moved back to the Bay Area, I participated in the Critical Resistance conference in 1998 and learned about growing networks of youth activism in the Bay Area. I also began to conduct writing workshops in juvenile hall for The Beat Within, a Bay Area weekly magazine produced by and for incarcerated youth, which kept me in contact with the perspective of youth in the system. Although these activities were not formally part of my fieldwork, when Proposition 21 was added to the March 2000 ballot, I began to participate in planning meetings, street outreach, and rallies, both as a participant and as an observer. Youth were frequently marginalized in local politics, but they were not silent observers. To understand Oakland’s vibrant youth activist networks, I interviewed youth leaders and conducted four focus groups with youth activists from the neighborhoods I studied. I observed young people on city streets and playgrounds, attended school assemblies about discipline, and watched interactions between youth and adult activists in community meetings to see the formal and informal ways young people challenged dominant discourses about what youth need and where they belong.

As I conducted this research from within very different political mobilizations, I occupied multiply marked identities that influenced people’s responses to me in complex ways: a young, highly educated, upper-middle-class white
woman without children, a researcher, and also a resident of San Francisco. Observing my own comfort and discomfort moving through these political networks helped to highlight the racial, class, and generational structures of Oakland’s politics and geography. I felt most at home in the multiracial networks of progressive political activists in the lower hills, where I met friends to go out to bars and restaurants and used the local café as my office. When I was at largely African American community meetings in the flatlands, I “fit in” in a very different way. People often mistook me for a reporter, or a nonprofit or government employee, which was exactly where my race, class, and age located me in Oakland’s political and social geography. Like other politically engaged twenty-something nonprofit workers I knew, I traveled from my childhood home in San Francisco through Oakland’s poorer neighborhoods every day and night as part of my “work.” I was one of the “adult children” living at home with my parents that some of my informants talked and worried about. I was significantly younger than most adult activists I interviewed and conscious of the respect that required. I simply never would have called Mrs. Jackson, an African American grandmother, by her first name, though I would do so with Victor, a sixteen-year-old youth activist, or Robert, a younger parent close to my own age. Although most names in this book are pseudonyms, I refer to Oakland activists according to the codes of respect I used in my everyday interactions.

Reflecting on my years in the field, I realize that I actively, though not always consciously, managed my identity in different ways throughout my fieldwork. With older African American activists, I often explicitly talked about how I thought racism had shaped Oakland’s history, in order to overcome a kind of racial politeness that accompanied many early interviews. In professional planning meetings, I dressed up and spoke like a nonprofit worker informed about the best practices of youth reform, and I cultivated a very different style at youth-led rallies. But as I did fieldwork with youth activists fighting against police brutality as well as community policing activists, I decided that the most ethical approach was to share my emerging interpretations with my informants, along with my own political commitments and critiques.

This book leads readers on a journey through the politics of youth, race, and space in Oakland at the turn of the twenty-first century—through the memories, local histories, geographies, and fragmented state institutions that influenced debates over how to respond to the crises young people faced coming of age. These debates about children and youth occur in particular places, not only, or even primarily, in the disembodied contexts of the mass
media. The first three chapters of this book are organized to highlight the importance of place, showing how Oakland’s geographies of race and class shaped children’s lives and the politics of youth. These chapters lead the reader from the flatlands up through the lower hills and finally into the hills. This path through the city mirrors the ways images and young people themselves move through Oakland’s geography. Fears of youth in Oakland were often forged through media coverage of crime and images of the youth in the flatlands. But these representations of “inner-city kids” moved up into the hills to shape the perceptions of adults and activists in the hills. Young people themselves moved up the hill as they searched for better schools and safer places. Arriving in schools or parks in the hills, they often encountered fears of flatland kids.

Each chapter begins with a portrait of a community activist that highlights his or her memories of childhood and childrearing, analyses of what young people need, and political struggles. The chapters follow these activists into their political practice and daily lives, exploring how memory and local history shape the politics of youth. Each chapter highlights a different way community partnerships have affected political practice by influencing the way activists defined the needs of young people, the boundaries between public and private responsibility, and the idea of the state. Chapter 1 explores community policing activism in Elmhurst, examining the dilemmas of black homeowner activists whose nostalgia for disciplined youth encouraged them to construct a vision of a disciplinary state with expanded police powers. Chapter 2 examines a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of parent activists in the lower hills who volunteered their private time to try to expand public investments that would extend middle-class structured and supervised time to all kids in the neighborhood. Chapter 3 explores conflicts around Skyline High School between black middle-class parents and white homeowners who fought over whether kids at the school were dangerous criminals or innocent kids. White homeowners living in Oakland’s private estates often framed youth problems as “cultural” or familial in ways that naturalized Oakland’s man-made geography of inequality and helped justify California’s disinvestments in the public infrastructure for children. Black parents vociferously defended their children against the image of black youth criminality that threatened to redefine them as dangerous outsiders in their own schools and streets.

Chapter 4 steps back to examine Oakland’s urban redevelopment from a citywide perspective, exploring the links between the politics of youth and the city’s urban redevelopment policies and practices. It begins with a
portrait of MacArthur Boulevard, a main thoroughfare that embodies Oakland’s fitful and incomplete transformation from a landscape of production to a landscape of consumption and the contradictory role young people have played in this process. It shows how new landscapes of childhood and community activists’ efforts to save children have helped to create the privatized urban space characteristic of many neoliberal cities. Chapter 5 concludes the book with the voices of youth activists, who offer a critique of neighborhood activism in Oakland and an alternate vision of the politics of childhood and the place of youth in the city.

Oakland’s activists offer important insights into the underlying question of this book: Is a more progressive politics of childhood possible? People’s fears about kids are urgently real and deeply felt. We can’t just wish them away. There are no simple answers to the dilemmas Oakland’s activists faced, but that does not mean, as we saw Jerry Brown suggest at the beginning of this introduction, that there is nothing government can do. The inequalities in children’s lives in Oakland and the exclusions of black boys from childhood are incompatible with the true meaning of democracy and the promise of the American Dream. With high levels of public support for children’s health insurance and growing support for after-school funding, some public policy observers wonder whether a new wave of “kids-first politics” could reinvigorate public support for an expanded welfare state. To evaluate that question we need to ask: What would it require for the United States to make good on its promise to provide equal opportunities to all of America’s children and youth? What kinds of public policies and state practices would encourage democratized childhood and youth? Just as importantly, what kind of politics and activism would get the nation to make those investments? And what ideas about childhood and the state stand in the way?