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ABSTRACT

An overview of Alex Kotlowitz' book "There Are No Children Here" substantiates his claim that the United States is moving toward two separate and unequal societies--one black and one white. His book recounts the story of two boys (and their mother) who live in the Henry Horner Housing Project in Chicago. The mother believes in the power of education, but the daily experiences of a savage environment take their toll on the whole family. A disproportionate number of at risk students, both in reading and general education, are poor minority students. Educators and researchers who are serious about improving the status of reading and education, about making children a priority, and about America becoming a "nation of readers" should explore the "other America" through Kotlowitz' poignant book which graphically depicts the experiences of inner city children. (NH)

AT RISK STUDENTS IN THE OTHER AMERICA AS EXPLORED BY ALEX KOTLOWITZ IN THE BOOK THERE ARE NO CHILDREN HERE

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The same factors--socioeconomic, physical, psychological, and educational usually in combination--which are the cause of reading disability are undoubtedly responsible for students who are at risk of general failure in America's schools. Very often these at risk students, whether in reading or general education, are minorities. Gibson and Levine (1980) have stated that a disproportionate number of the poor are disabled readers. As might be expected, a disproportionate number of America's poor are minorities.

If educators are serious about America Becoming a Nation of Readers they will have to examine the place where large numbers of at risk minorities live. Alex Kotlowitz, author of There are No Children Here, calls this place the other America. He quotes the Kerner Commission (1968) which warned two and one-half decades ago that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black and one white--separate and unequal."

It is the other America that Kotlowitz explores in There are No Children Here. The book is very poignant and graphically depicts the other America. It is a reading imperative for educators and researchers who are serious about improving the status of reading and education, about making children a priority, about ensuring that America becomes a nation of readers. Change will only come when America remembers, like Gabriela Mistal--Nobel Prize Winner, that positive childhood experiences including a quality education are irretrievabble. Mistal wrote:

We are guilty of many
errors and many faults.
But our worst crime is
abandoning the children...
Neglecting
the fountain of life
Many of the things
we need can wait...
The Child CANNOT.

The overview of There are No Children Here follows:

Alex Kotlowitz, There are No Children Here, New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1991.

This book grew out of a photographic essay that was being done by the author on children in poverty for the Chicago Magazine. The title, There Are No Children Here, came directly from an interview where Kotlowitz asked the mother of the two boys, Pharoah and Lafeyette who are the focus of the book, for permission to depict the boys and the neighborhood in the book. The mother, LaJoe Rivers, liked the idea but hesitantly replied, "But you know, there are no children here. They've seen too much to be children."

The setting is in Chicago mainly at Henry Horner Housing Project from the summer 1987 to summer 1989. This is part of the same housing project where Jane Byrne, Chicago mayor in 1981, spent three weeks in the rodent-and-insect infested, broken-glass laden, gang-inhabited Cabrini Green.

This is a neighborhood without health facilities, without reasonably-priced, fresh food; without safe places for children to play; without opportunities; without justice; without hope. It is a neighborhood where its residents are pawns in psychological, social, educational, legal, and political games. It is a neighborhood where the convenience of suburbanites takes precedence over its African American residents' lives. [The city refused to install a traffic light to slow the suburbanites' entrance and exit to the city inspite of the fact that there had been a number of fatal accidents at that site.] It is a neighborhood where parents are weary, often burned out, and frustrated, but who, nevertheless, love their children; the parents know that education is the only way to escape the Henry Horner plight and, therefore, encourage their children to stay in and finish what many have described as failed schools. The neighborhood's "rich" drug culture and pervasive violence are strong competitors for the schools.

But Henry Suder Elementary School is an oasis especially for Pharoah who is LaJoe's hope for a diploma in the Rivers' family. Suder, too, is an oasis in another way for the Henry Horner children. It is a well-run school which is free of graffiti and violence and where though reading and math scores are below average, they show steady improvement by eighth-grade graduation.

Suder is successful even though only a handful of men teachers are counted among its 38 teachers; in this neighborhood, male role models are needed because 85 percent of the homes are headed by females. Until recent decades teachers in schools like Suder serving a predominantly minority population received 85 percent of the salary of teachers in majority schools and the per pupil expense was 66 percent as high. Much of Suder's success can be credited to Brenda Daigre, who has been principal since 1975. Ms. Daigre raises funds to take a dozen or more students to Africa annually and displays African artifacts in the first-floor hallway of the school. Students wear Project Africa T-shirts. This project was featured in the September 23, 1991, issue of Newsweek. Suder exists in a school system identified as the nation's worst, where the drop out rate is 40 percent. While Ms. Daigre's greatness is well known, she is not universally loved by Suder parents nor is the school free of budgetary constraints; to Pharoah, Suder is a place of love.

Unlike well lighted apartment buildings in other settings, the residents of Henry Horner often carried flashlights to use in the passing through the darkened tunnel-like hallways. Residents--adults and children--were cautioned never to stand in or sit near windows for fear that they might be shot. In this environment, the Rivers lived in a large five bedroom apartment with two baths. There were usually eight residents, but on many occasions, it was very overcrowded because adult family members would return to take up residence. In addition, many of major appliances such as the stove or refrigerator were often in disrepair. One of the two bathrooms often could not be used because of a terrible stench--the family thought the stench was caused by decaying human flesh from the previous tenants who were alleged to have performed abortions and disposed of the fetuses in the toilet, but in 1989, Gwen Anderson, a newly appointed housing manager, discovered over two thousand once-new, never-used major appliances and cabinets rusting in Horner's water-filled basement; surrounding the appliances were the carcasses of decaying rodents and other animals--this was the stench that often filled the Rivers' second bathroom.

In this setting, the Rivers lived. LaJoe, Pharoah, and Lafeyette Rivers were selected by Kotlowitz as perhaps a representative sample of

this population in the other America.

LaJoe Rivers (nee Anderson) was a long-term resident of Henry Horner Homes having moved there as a child in 1956 when the apartments were new and operating as planned with playgrounds, grass-covered baseball diamonds, Girl Scouts, Boys Club, a Bugle Corps, and politically-active adults. She and her thirteen siblings and her parents were thrilled with the move to Horner. Both of her parents, who had moved while still single to the "promise land," had come from the shacks and shanties of their prospective cities--her mother from Charleston, West Virginia; her father from Camden, Arkansas. Chicago was a step up, and Henry Horner was a step up from their first second-floor Chicago apartment which was demolished for a university building.

Little did LaJoe realize that Henry Horner and the neighborhood would deteriorate so badly or that it would swallow up her family members starting with the mysterious murder of her grown sister and the losing a number of her children to the neighborhood. This is the site where she struggled, grieved, feared, and almost gave up hope in bringing up her own eight children.

Her hopes were high and her dreams magical, when she met and fell in love with her only husband when she was just thirteen years old. She married Paul Rivers when she was fifteen but not before she had given birth to two children. Three other single births and triplets were born to this union. LaJoe believed in family and desperately wanted her children to grow up with a father in the home. But her husband's addiction to heroin dashed her dream and shattered their bond. Not only was her husband lost to drugs, but she felt that the decadent neighborhood where drugs and violence were rampant swallowed up her three older children who dropped out of school, were involved with drugs, and had all served some time in jail. Her twenty-year-old daughter was a prostitute.

Inspite of her disappointments with her older children and the neighborhood, her hope was in education. She, herself, went to school to earn her high school equivalency and worked for five years as a clerk for the Miles Square Health Center before it became defunct. Her dream was that her younger children would value education as she did. To this end, she supported her children. However, she showed unconditional love

to all her children even in her disappointment--she always appeared with her children in their court trials and visited them when they were incarcerated.

Lafeyette and Pharoan, LaJoe's middle children, were preadolescents--ten and seven respectively--when they were first met by the author. Kotlowitz said that these years were, "a rickety bridge to adolescence." Kotlowitz further remarked that "over a two-year period as they [Lafeyette and Pharoah] struggle with school, attempt to resist the death of friends, all while searching for some inner peace."

Lafeyette was in some ways like the typical preadolescent/adolescent. He was slightly built, generally fun loving, influenced by his peers, and possessed a strong sense of fairness. Like many students his age, his performance and attendance were greatly affected by the expectations of his teachers. As an example, he earned A's in both science and math the year he had a caring, supportive teacher.

He was atypical when compared to many majority youths his age because he was his mother's confidant after his father's absence; he also was the surrogate father for his younger siblings. He often had to protect them in the "war zone" outside his Horner apartment. Though always more feisty than Pharoah, Lafeyette was generally cooperative, sensitive, and insightful.

Lafeyette came to question and even to disrepect police after he was psychologically and physically abused by the police and saw several friends killed by them unjustifiably. One friend who was killed was about five years Lafeyette's senior, had been a model-high school student, an honor graduate, and a respected employee. Lafeyette idolized this young man who was somewhat of a mentor to him. Later, Lafeyette, was unjustifiably charged, tried, and placed on probation. But the reader is left with the feeling that despite of all his pain, he is going to emerge whole and productive.

Pharoah was even more slightly built than Lafeyette. Unlike Lafeyette, he was an outstanding student and was not greatly influenced by his neighborhood peers. He loved his family greatly. One of his prized times in the two-year period of this book was when LaJoe took

him, the younger children, and several neighborhood friends to window shop and to eat in downtown Chicago at Christmas time. Just as he loved his family, he loved his school, was a very responsible student and was loved by his school mates.

Pharoah had a stutter which was more frequent and more pronounced when there was great stress in his home. This stutter, however, led his teacher to marvel at his determination when he persisted in introducing himself to the class. One year he was a finalist in the school spelling bee; he studied very hard, but his stutter kept him from being successful. He vowed that the next year if he had the opportunity, it would not happen again. With the aid of a counselor and his mother, he learned to control his stuttering. The next year, he participated in the spelling bee--he was the representative for his class, and he was victorious. The reader is left with the feeling that Pharoah will control his life just as he learned to control his stutter.

As Kotlowitz closes the sociological accounting, Horner is improving, and the reader feels that the Rivers led by the determined matriarch will too.

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