New Directions

Volume 11 | Issue 2 Article 4

1-1-1984

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Recommended Citation
Scarupa, Harriet Jackson (1984) "JOYCE LADNER:The Odyssey of an ‘Ambivalent Sociologist," *New Directions*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 4.
Available at: https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol11/iss2/4

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JOYCE LADNER:

The Odyssey of an 'Ambivalent Sociologist'

Published by Digital Howard @ Howard University, 1984

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

In a room in Howard University's School of Social Work, doctoral students are nearing the close of a lively discussion of *Meridian,* Alice Walker's powerful novel about the odyssey of a civil rights worker.

The exchange of ideas takes place in a seminar called "The Individual" which is designed to help social workers develop the theoretical and practical knowledge they will need to work with troubled individuals. This means students analyze *Meridian* far less as a work of art than as an especially imaginative case study of how one person tries to resolve problems.

Leading the seminar are two members of the school's interdisciplinary faculty: Joyce Ladner (Ph.D., sociology) and Dorothy Pearson (Ph.D., social welfare.)

Ladner has been in charge of the discussions on *Meridian* and now it is time for her to pull together some of the book's themes. She leans forward intently, glances down at her notes and speaks of the novel's complex protagonist, Meridian Hill, a former civil rights worker who returns to the South to carry on the work of the movement *and* to seek her own psychological/spiritual peace:

"What we see is an individual who is attempting to find and shape an identity. Her struggle has to do with who she is, how to cope on a day-to-day basis. Walker does not resolve Meridian's dilemmas for her completely; she asks us to empathize with Meridian as Meridian goes on a painful odyssey, an odyssey which enables us to explore our own attitudes and beliefs.

"All of this is cast within one of the most energetic periods of our history, the civil rights movement. The core of the book has to do with the ability of a person to grow, to develop, to follow one's inner voices. It shows the capacity of the human spirit to be transformed."

Like Meridian Hill, Joyce Ladner is a daughter of the South. Like Meridian Hill, Joyce Ladner is a walking legacy of the civil rights movement. Like Meridian Hill, Joyce Ladner knows what it means to undertake a painful odyssey. Like Meridian Hill, Joyce Ladner has followed her own inner voices, voices that have led *her* to sociology.

When you watch Ladner in action in class — whether she's methodically covering some sociological topic or reminiscing in a more down-home manner about her own background—the image is one of a woman totally at ease in her lifework. When you look at her long *curriculum vitae* and note her contributions to the field, this impression is reinforced.

Consider her books: *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (Doubleday, 1971), her study of Black teenage girls in a St. Louis public housing project; *The Death of White Sociology* (Random House, 1973), her collection of essays calling for a new perspective in the social sciences; *Mixed Families: Adopting Across Racial Boundaries* (Doubleday, 1977), her study of white couples who have adopted Black children; *Notes on the Changing South,* her work-in-progress about the impact of the civil rights movement on individuals and institutions.

Consider her many articles in professional journals, popular magazines and newspapers, articles with such titles as "The Legacy of Black Womanhood," "What 'Black Power' Means to Negroes in Mississippi," "Tanzanian Women and Nation Building," "The Black Middle Class Defined," "The South: Old-New Land," "Women in Poverty: Its Roots and Effects," "Labeling Black Children: Social-Psychological Implications."

Consider her work as a teacher (Southern Illinois University, 1968-69), Hunter College (1973-81), Howard University (1971-73 and 1981 to the present), her involvement in numerous learned societies (e.g., American Sociological Society, Society for the Study of Social Problems, Association of Black Sociologists, Association of Humanist Sociologists); the papers she has presented at professional meetings (24 since 1976); the grants her research has attracted (e.g., from the Ford Foundation, Russell Sage Foundation, Cummins Engine Foundation).

Consider, finally, her reputation as a scholar. "Dr. Ladner is one of the major theoreticians in sociology in the country," says Jay Chunn, dean of Howard University's School of Social Work. "Her writings and research are of the highest quality. She has taken a positive and developmental approach to sociology as it relates to Black people. By that I mean she looks at Black individuals and Black families from the standpoint of stress, coping styles, how they operate and function. She looks for positive aspects of Black development rather than just concentrating on deviance and pathology."

Says Lee Rainwater, a prominent Harvard University sociologist who supervised Ladner's research on teenage girls in St. Louis when he was on the faculty of Washington University: "It's very easy for a sociologist to deal with large issues but in a kind of very abstract and general kind of way. It seems to me that what she [Ladner] has done — both in St. Louis and in the adoption study — is to take an issue that is significant and shed light on it by actually going to people and finding out something about their experiences. That's what makes a good sociologist."

Ladner is also credited with "demystifying sociology" by demonstrating that scholarly insights need not be couched in near-indecipherable jargon to be valid. As Chunn says, "Certainly she has been a leader in being able to communicate to the lay public developments in her research and in the social sciences in general."

All of this — Ladner's reputation, achievements and the seeming ease she displays as she pursues her work as researcher-writer-teacher—is not without irony. For Ladner admits that she has always been an "ambivalent sociologist."

The reason for her attraction to the field in the first place was simple enough. "I wanted to be a sociologist because I was interested in understanding how people relate to each other," she says. "I've always been very curious about people.

When I walk down the street, I'm the type who'll stop and look at everybody around."

But once she actually became formally immersed in the field, things didn't seem all that simple. That's when ambivalence hit her like a sledgehammer. As she speaks of the reasons for this ambivalence, her voice loses its easygoing cadences, seeming to reflect her passage on an intellectual odyssey as painful, in its own way, as that of Meridian Hill.

"I went to graduate school [Washington University] just out of college [Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Miss.] where I'd been deeply involved in the civil rights movement and for the entire time I was in graduate school I had a lot of guilt and conflict," she recalls. "I felt I had no right to be in the security and confines of graduate school in St. Louis while my sister, Dorie, and all my friends were back in Mississippi and Alabama dodging bullets and carrying on the work I had been involved in. But at the same time, I threw myself into my studies. I finished in record time and did very well. [She earned her Ph.D. in 1968 at the age of 24.].

"Once I got out of graduate school, I went through a tremendous rebellion. First it was rather symbolic. I didn't want anyone to refer to me as 'doctor.'" Then she rejected taking the first step up the conventional academic ladder: "I felt that I hadn't done a lot of things and that I owed a lot back to the Black community. So I turned down job offers at some of the big 'prestigious' schools — much to the disappointment of my teachers, I'm sure—to take my first job in the ghetto of East St. Louis at a little branch of Southern Illinois University that was designed to take youngsters who were the poorest of the poor and try to mainstream them into the regular university program. From there I went from one place to another — to Atlanta to the Institute of the *Black* World, to Tanzania to broaden my horizons even further...

"I also rebelled against the fact that most of the established sociologists I knew were not involved in the civil rights movement or the anti-war movement and I felt that sociologists should be architects of change. If sociologists were really studying people and their environments I believed their place was to be involved in an activist way. So, in a sense, I felt betrayed.

The way so many mainstream sociologists tended to treat the Black experience (when they weren't ignoring it completely) also fed her rebellion and ambivalence:

> *"...mainstream sociology was very biased in terms of social class, in terms of race..."*

"I felt mainstream sociology was very biased in terms of social class, in terms of race, that it was much too uniform in its approach to looking at the world. It had a myopic vision that tended to see things in stark contrast — white vs. black. Flowing from this narrow vision was the problem of mainstream sociology viewing Blacks and other minorities as almost always in a deviant perspective and its refusal to validate the status of Blacks as a viable minority group in the society.

"To me, mainstream sociology was very heavily laden with bias. Yet it claimed to be value-free, value-neutral. I never believed those claims. I felt that what people were doing was hiding a lot of their strong, strong feelings behind a veneer."

Ladner could never find descriptions of Black low-income families like her own and others she knew in the sociological literature (with all its commentary on "matriarchal domination" and "tangles of pathology" and "cultural deprivation," etc., etc.) "We were nine children and one income, a small one," she says. "But it was a very stable family. The kids didn't get into trouble. We had food to eat. We were clean and tidy. Our parents were in a very stable marriage. My mother was a strong person but she certainly wasn't dominant. She deferred to my stepfather, always. Yet where were the descriptions of such families in the books I read in graduate school?"

Coping with these questions, contradictions and conflicts caused "Joyce Ladner, Ph.D., sociology" to be a very angry young woman for a time. *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* and *The Death of White Sociology* could be seen as her attempts to harness that anger and use it creatively.

Tomorrow's Tomorrow evolved from her doctoral dissertation. On one level it is an examination of what approaching womanhood meant to some 100 poor Black girls growing up in the notorious Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis. She spent almost four years interviewing, testing, observing and, in general, hanging out with these girls, once even panhandling with a few to come up with the bus fare to go to a dance hall and then accepting the teen boys' invitations to dance — much to the amusement of the girls. The girls seem to have regarded her as a big sister and shared with her their views on a wide range of subjects: friendship, family, Black identity, education, sex, stealing, future aspirations.... Listen, for instance, to one of her subjects describe the kind of life she'd like to have "when she grows up:"

"I wouldn't want to be rich at all. I don't think it's fair for anyone to be rich and not help people because if they think back they will realize that deep down inside they could have been the people that they now see walking the streets looking like tramps. I just want to be the average person like I am now, have a good job to support my mother and father or my own family."

But *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* goes beyond such individual voices and experiences. The book also charts the intellectual dilemmas Ladner faced in undertaking the study. In the introduction, she writes:

"As I became more involved with the subjects of this research, I knew that I would not be able to play the role of the dispassionate scientist, whose major ob-

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jective was to extract certain data from them that would simply be used to *describe* and *theorize* about their conditions. I began to perceive my role as a Black person, with empathy and attachment, and, to a great extent, their day-to-day lives and future destinies became intricately interwoven with my own. This did not occur without a considerable amount of agonizing self-evaluation and conflict over 'whose side I was on.'"

Deciding "there could be no value-free sanctuary for me," she chose to side with the young Black women who were the subjects of her research. Her reason for this was not only ideological [this was the heyday of the Black identity-Black consciousness movement] but personal. "I grew up with those girls," she says. "I was 20 when I first met them and some of them might have been 17, 18 and I came into my own as they entered their cycles of development. But beyond that, I *identified* with them as Black females and I felt their poverty with an acute sense of 'there but for the grace of God go I.' We were poor. My father was an auto mechanic and my mother was a homemaker. My roots were as humble as theirs [the girls she studied.]. Had our parents moved us to St. Louis there would have been a great possibility that our family would have suffered some of the problems those large families had. But, thank God, we remained in the South and had the security of a large extended family and did o.k."

Thus, in *Tomorrow's Tomorrow,* Ladner set out to present the beliefs, values, dreams and behaviors of the girls she studied the way they perceived them and not through the eyes of some alien, "objective" researcher. What she found was that "inner resourcefulness" seemed to be a major characteristic of these girls' lives; that they seemed to demonstrate "a stark understanding of the 'whys' and 'hows' of their condition;" that they seemed optimistic that somehow they would be able to better their lives; that they seemed free of the alleged "self-hatred" that was assumed to be the lot of most poor Blacks. This later finding led Ladner to make some hard-hitting observations:

"The self-hatred thesis can be categorized with the many myths that are propagated about Black people. It falls within the realm of institutional subjugation that is designed to perpetuate an oppressive class. For, so long as the Black community is perceived as being composed of 'matriarchates,' 'self-haters,' 'criminals,' 'deserters,' 'oversexed individuals' and the like, then the perceived institutionalized pathological character is more than adequate justification for its subordination . . .

"I choose to be what I call a scholar-activist because I don't feel that scholarship necessarily should be used solely for the transmission of knowledge."

"It is only when the analysis of the oppressive forces which produce various forms of antisocial behavior has been conducted that we can reverse the conceptualization of pathology. *The society, instead of its members, becomes pathological.*"

Equally hard-hitting observations are voiced in *The Death of White Sociology,* which Ladner conceived of as a vehicle to get the views of concerned Black social scientists and a few sensitive white social scientists before the general public. Essayists in the book decry the failure of mainstream sociology to adequately describe, understand and interpret the Black experience. They call for a new perspective in the social sciences, one that recognizes cultural pluralism. And they assert that Black sociologists cannot be simply neutral recorders of the particulars of Black life but must use their training and insights to improve that life. Black social scientists must become champions of Black liberation.

The book's militant tone is perhaps best captured in these words written by Andrew Billingsley whose *Black Families in White America* (Prentice Hall, 1968) had strongly influenced Ladner's thinking and scholarship:

"The need is pressing for social scientists to move out of their ancient theories, their libraries, their methodological preoccupations and take a good look at the modern world and try to describe it. It is unlikely, however, that the present aging, white male leadership in the social science disciplines can provide that kind of innovative leadership. The first need, then, is for the overthrow of the present social scientific hierarchy."

Collecting, presenting and editing such views in *The Death of White Sociology* and writing *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* seem to have acted as catharsis for Ladner, enabling her to work out her ambivalence about being a sociologist, taming her intellectual demons and allowing her to go on with her life: "I said, 'O.k., I am in sociology. Exactly what can I do with the training I've gotten? I can't throw it away. I can accept the ambivalence and I can refashion my knowledge and certainly use the methods of sociology to recast myself as a scholar-activist.' And that's essentially what I did."

This coming to terms was made easier by the fact that sociology itself was changing — largely in response to the kinds of questions raised by Ladner and other minority and feminist critics of the discipline. "Sociology has changed in a variety of ways," Ladner says. "It's become more quantitative. It's become more willing to recognize that one really can't be value-free. It's become more accepting of diversity. In the study of families, for example, the kind of rigidity that imposed the white middle-class family model onto all other Americans is far less pervasive today. There is far more acceptance of what we call family pluralism."

Her book, *Mixed Families: Adopting*

Across Racial Boundaries, deals with one especially controversial example of such pluralism.

In the early '70s, Ladner had begun reading newspaper feature stories about white couples who had adopted Black children. The articles perked her interest in the phenomena. "I couldn't understand transracial adoption and it had a lot to do with my own upbringing in segregated Mississippi. I was curious. I wanted to understand the motives behind it."

She searched the sociological literature and found almost nothing on the subject, sought and received a small grant to study white couples in the Washington, D.C. area who had adopted Black children, received additional grants which enabled her to expand her study to four other cities. Altogether, she did in-depth interviews with 126 couples. As she writes in the book's introduction, the fundamental question she sought to answer through her interviews and observation was this: "Could *any* child of a different race, nationality, or ethnic group develop into an emotionally healthy individual with a strong and positive sense of identity if he or she is reared by parents outside his or her ancestral group?"

She found some couples who emphatically denied their children were Black (calling them "biracial" or "human" or "Jewish" or whatever), who lived in all-white communities, socialized exclusively with whites and saw no reason why they should expose their families to Black culture. She found others who tried to "out Black" Black folks, trying to immerse themselves in a Black world in an unconsciously patronizing and artificial way. She found some who seemed to regard their Black children as cute little pets; others who seemed to regard them as noble savages. But she also found sensitive white parents who seemed to be doing a reasonably good job, who seemed capable of not only loving their Black children but of helping them to forge a healthy psyche and a strong identitiy. "They weren't perfect parents," she says, "but we also could find a lot of Black parents who aren't perfect parents."

Mixed Families presents transracial adoption as neither a step towards the realization of an interracial utopia, as do some of its white advocates, nor does the book view it as a form of Black genocide, as some outspoken Black social workers have charged. The National Association of Black Social Workers once called it "a lethal incursion on the Black family that must be stopped." One speaker at a social work conference referred to it as "this psychological bastardization of our children."

"What I said in the book," Ladner observes, "is that I felt every possible effort should be made to find Black parents for Black children and this would include enlarging the pool of applicants to include older persons, single parents, etc. and that after all of these searches have been carried out, if there are still no Black families available to adopt a child I would then endorse white parents who meet some specific criterion."

In the book, she spells out the criterion this way: "... the parents should be mature; able to accept racial and other differences; be sensitive to and aware of their own prejudices and racism; and should certainly have a lifestyle that will permit their family to have sustained contacts with other blacks on an equal basis."

About two other things she is equally adamant: "The [Black] child should not be used by the adoptive couple to prove a point, whether it is to prove their independence from their own families, to prove their liberalism, to expiate racial guilt, or whatever. Also, a black or mixed-race child should not be resorted to as a last choice, after the white applicants find that there are no white children available."

Transracial placement, she reiterates, should only be made if no Black parents can be found to adopt a particular child and then only after white applicants are carefully screened. "I do not agree with some Black advocates who stated that they'd rather see a child in an institution than be with a white family," says Ladner who is the mother of a nine-year old son. "I think institutional child rearing is horrible for anyone under any conditions."

Transracial adoption is far less an object of public scrutiny these days. Partly, it's because the media has found new "fads" to cover. Partly, it's because more Blacks are formally adopting, thanks to programs set up by Black social workers to encourage adoption, articles on the problems of homeless Black children in the predominantly-Black media and pressures put on adoption agencies to change some of their super-stringent requirements for parenthood. (In the past, for instance, some agencies wouldn't allow a couple to adopt if the woman held a job outside the home or if a couple was unable to provide a separate bedroom for each child.) It's also because those agencies that continue to make transracial adoptions "do them in a far more sober fashion," Ladner says. That this is the case is also testimony to the impact of her book which received wide attention in scholarly journals and the popular media and was widely discussed in adoption circles.

Despite the controversy surrounding transracial adoptions, the tone and language of *Mixed Families* is far quieter than either *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* or *The Death of White Sociology.* It's a tone that seems to match the more recent demeanor of its author.

"I've mellowed, I suppose, or come to grips," Ladner says somewhat wryly as she sits in a Howard University office looking the epitome of "dress-for-success" save for the big, dramatic jewelry she favors. "But I hope I'll always feel a little of the conflict I once felt because I don't want to ever get so comfortable in the discipline that I can say that I accept it as it is. I want to always feel that there's a necessity for change. I feel that way about almost everything.

"I choose to be what I call a scholar-activist," she continues, "because I don't feel that scholarship necessarily should be used solely for the transmission of knowledge. I think I have a personal re-

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sponsibility to try to bring about change." This sense of personal responsibility had its origins in the soil of segregationist Mississippi and was honed in the civil rights movement.

"I always abhorred the injustice of segregation," she says quietly, intensely. "I understood how it victimized me. It was a form of persecution that I felt very very painfully, very personally. I was always *insulted* that I could not go to the great public library downtown [Hattiesburg, Miss.] and check out books. I felt insulted by segregation and I also felt deep pain. When I saw kids come to school without shoes, I cried. I felt if white people treated Black people the way they should, we wouldn't have to endure things like this."

"Tougaloo was a place where intellectual freedom reigned for 100 years. God am I glad I went there!"

Strong feelings about segregation caused Ladner and her older sister Dorie [Dorie Churnet, now a social worker at D.C. General Hospital] to be ripe for a movement dedicated to its destruction.

The "good news" of the movement was first brought to them in the person of a "Dr." McLeod, an herbalist who would visit Palmers Crossing, the small, all-Black community outside Hattiesburg where their family lived. He would sell his home-made medicines from his car and also bring with him copies of Black newspapers and magazines with their stories about racial injustice and some of the battles being waged against it and biographies of famous Black men and women. "He talked to us a lot about our obligations as youngsters to overthrow the system of segregation," Ladner recalls. "Dorie and I had these visions of one day being great civil rights leaders and dreams about social change."

In high school, Vernon Dahmer, president of the Hattiesburg NAACP, took the two sisters under his wing, taking them to state NAACP rallies, and inspired them to organize a NAACP youth chapter made up of students from all over the Hattiesburg area. Through this work they also met Medgar Evers, NAACP Mississippi field secretary, who they were to visit in his office time and again when they began studies in 1960 at Jackson State College. [Both men's activism cost them their lives. Evers was the target to an assassin's bullet in 1963; Dahmer burned to death when his house was firebombed in 1966.]

Ladner remembers one especially memorable visit to Evers' office. "He said, 'I'm going to tell you something. Some changes are going to be made very very soon and I'd like for you to be ready for them when they come. Be able to get students together on Jackson State's campus when this happens.' Then he said that the students at Tougaloo were going to stage a sit-in at the public library and they would need support."

When hundreds of Jackson students turned out to support the Tougaloo students, Jackson State's president called in the police — with their dogs. The president's action inspired boycotts of classes; protests not only against segregation and the police but also against the school's president; more police intrusions on campus; expulsion of the student government president; and, finally, the early closing of the school. This occurred during the spring of 1961 but when Ladner talks about it, it seems like it was yesterday. Like an old soldier recounting a victorious battle, she exclaims, "It was a mess. But we closed that school down. It was fantastic!"

Just before the school was closed down, though, the dean of students called Joyce and Dorie Ladner into his office, accused them of being behind the disturbances and threatened them with expulsion also. "He said, 'This is not a place that's conducive to your kind of thinking' and 'You're getting these students riled up; you're agitating,'" recalls Ladner, with relish. "Not to be outdone, we told him. 'We're going to leave anyway.'"

The following fall the Ladner sisters enrolled at nearby Tougaloo College. "Tougaloo was on the forefront of the entire southern civil rights movement," Ladner says. "We had faculty, staff, students go to jail. When the Freedom Riders came out of jail that summer, they stayed at Tougaloo. We had every conceivable person come on campus to speak. Tougaloo was a place where intellectual freedom reigned for 100 years. God am I glad I went there! It was like being in heaven!"

Ladner became a field secretary for SNCC (The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), spending half of her time working in the movement but never dropping out of school. ("I kept hearing my mother's voice in my ear saying, 'Get your education. That's something no one can take from you.'") She worked on voter registration, participated in countless demonstrations and sit-ins, spent a week in jail after being arrested for attempting to integrate a church, served as SNCC representative in the national headquarters of the historic 1963 March on Washington.

Her participation in the civil rights movement and in SNCC, in particular, she says, "was unquestionably the most important experience I ever had. God yes." In an article in the June 1977 issue of *Essence,* "Return to the Source," she expresses why she feels this was so:

"I do know that I would not have had such a rich life [if she hadn't been involved in SNCC]; I would not have met some of the most interesting people alive; I doubt that I would have traveled to Africa and other places. More important, I certainly wouldn't have developed the perspective on world politics and the human condition — a perspective that has enabled me as a teacher and writer to influence people in a certain way — that I now have. Snick [SNCC] provided the context, the background, the forum for my enlightenment. It was through Snick that I was exposed to other Blacks and whites who felt the same way about justice and

equality as I did. . . . We all shared the common dream that one day we would create a society in which racial oppression and poverty would be eliminated."

Not surprisingly, fellow SNCC activists have remained some of her closest friends. "We're always having reunions and parties," she says. "I like being around SNCC people because you don't have to explain yourself to them each time. You can just pick up where you left off. It's probably the same kind of spirit and affinity people who were in the social movements in the '30s have for each other. It's like family.

"There's a state of understanding that for some people transcends even a relationship with a spouse. I once asked my husband, 'Walter, does it bother you that we keep having these reunions and when we go to parties all the SNCC people gravitate towards the kitchen table and talk and talk?' He said 'No, not in the least. I just wonder why you all feel the need to meet all the time.'" [Ladner is married to Walter Carrington, a former executive vice president of the African-American Institute who was ambassador to Senegal under the Carter Administration and now serves as director of Howard's Department of International Affairs.]

The new book she has been struggling with over the last four years, in part, will attempt to assess the impact of the civil rights movement on some of Ladner's old SNCC coworkers. "One of the interesting things about all the people I interviewed," Ladner says, "is that they're still organizing. "They're nurses, doctors, teachers, homemakers, social workers . . . But they see an extension of their movement activity into whatever they do."

Her own activism today, like her demeanor, is much quieter than it was in those days when she faced police dogs, tear gas and screaming bigots.

"I consider my activist role to be that of serving on boards that are geared towards social change, that are geared toward facilitating the work of grassroots organizations," she says. These boards include those of The Twenty-First Century Foundation, The Field Foundation and the Fund for Peace's Project on National Goals.

This means she spends a lot of time sitting in meetings. So what's so activist about sitting in meetings—talking, shuffling papers and taking notes? the cynic might ask. "Sure, I sit in a lot of meetings," Ladner replies. "But the question should be, what goes on in these meetings? Am I sitting in a meeting to discuss profit-sharing in some big corporation or the concerns of society ladies? Or am I reporting on a site visit I made to a Black Woman's Network project in the South which is planning to put together a Black women's agenda to present to all the ['84] presidential candidates. . . which is something I just did?"

"I occasionally will go out on a demonstration and I will take up a picket sign," she says. "But I prefer to express my activism today by helping make it possible for other people to get their work done—just as other people in the past helped me to get my work done. I see the same role in dealing with students. I have reached a stage now where I want to be a mentor. I finally decided it's time to start putting out some students of my own."

Ruby Morton is one such student. Ladner serves as her adviser, overseeing a doctoral dissertation on "Decision-Making and Locus of Control and Pregnancy Outcome of Black Adolescents." Morton has been studying 30 teenage mothers between the ages of 13-18 and trying to measure their level of decision-making, a topic sparked by her concern with the high infant mortality experienced in teenage pregnancies and the overall problem of "babies having babies."

Her dissertation topic, she says, is definitely related to some of the work Ladner did on teenage girls for her own dissertation and in *Tomorrow's Tomorrow.* "I guess that's one reason Dr. Ladner's been so helpful to me," Morton acknowledges. "She was a pioneer, in a way, at looking at what actually happens with Black girls and considering their cultural perspective."

Morton also credits Ladner with helping to ease the long, often tedious process involved in working on a doctoral dissertation. "Sometimes you can become discouraged," she says. "Dr. Ladner keeps abreast of what I'm doing, gives constructive criticism and gives me a feeling of confidence that I can stick it out. I've been a social worker for 10 years and one of the things I also like about her is that she gives me a lot of respect for the knowledge I have in my field. Social work and sociology are related, of course . . . in terms of theory, not practice."

Some people, in fact, seem surprised to find that Ladner teaches in the School of Social Work instead of in the Department of Sociology (in the College of Liberal Arts and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.) But as Dean Jay Chunn points out, there's nothing unusual about having a sociologist on board: "Social work utilizes a social science base that comes from several areas. We have an interdisciplinary faculty. Out of 29 faculty members with doctorates seven have degrees outside social work in such fields as psychology, sociology, public administration and human development."

In addition to advising individual doctoral students and co-teaching that seminar on "The Individual," Ladner teaches the courses "Family and Child Services," "Family Theory and Research" and "Introduction to Social Policy." Thus has the classroom become another stage for her activism.

At a meeting of her "Introduction to Social Policy" class last fall, Ladner threw out some thought-provoking comments on the subject of Blacks in public policy. Sample: "The major response of American institutions to the Black condition has been the perpetuation of economic, political and social inequality. At every level of government, Blacks have historically been excluded from the mainstream of the process of policy formulation. *"That's a very absolute statement,"* Ladner then said in a challenging voice. "Who thinks

I'm overstating the case? Who disagrees?" And another lively discussion was launched.

Towards the end of the class she referred to one of the publications on the reading list: "A Policy Framework for Racial Justice," a monograph published by the Joint Center for Political Studies with a foreword by historian John Hope Franklin and psychologist Kenneth Clark. She reviewed the authors' contention that at least three societies now exist in America: the mainstream, the assimilated Americans and the excluded, "or what some have called the underclass."

"...It's never been easy to be poor, but it's hell to be poor today."

Stepping up to the blackboard, Ladner drew a curve to show the rise of the Black underclass — the chronically unemployed, underemployed, inadequately educated poor who may never become productive members of society — converging with what she called "a rise of scarcity, not only nationwide but worldwide." What such a graph shows, she said, putting it the simplest way possible, is that "it's never been easy to be poor; but it's hell to be poor today."

Both in the classroom and in informal conversation, Ladner tends to return almost obsessively to that troubling idea of a permanent Black underclass. "I'm very naive in a lot of ways," she admits. "I felt that after 20 years of social programs and the gains of the civil rights movement, affirmative action and all that, we wouldn't have a group of people who are now so deeply entrenched in their poverty that we are now actually referring to them as a permanent underclass."

Even when she was studying those teenage girls in St. Louis who ostensibly seemed destined to remain trapped in poverty forever, she still felt hopeful. "I was young enough at the time to feel that some of those girls might, in fact, escape—because *they* were so optimistic," she explains. "Every girl, even if she had a baby in her stomach, was optimistic that she could still get her house in the suburbs with that two-car garage. I thought it was unrealistic that these girls would get all that but I thought that maybe they would be able to improve their lives. A few people were still getting out [of poverty.] There were anti-poverty programs, training programs. There seemed some avenues available."

So too had Ladner felt optimistic about the overall chances of Black Americans becoming truly first-class citizens. Even though demonstrating for civil rights in the '60s was fraught with danger, she says, it was still a testament to hope: "We saw change was occurring. We knew things were going to be different. But what discourages me today is that all of the effort and the lives that were lost and the blood that was shed and the real sacrifices made by people have brought so little.

"It's like the title of a speech Wiley Branton [former dean of the Howard University School of Law and noted civil rights lawyer] gave over at All Souls Unitarian Church: 'Civil Rights Déjà Vu.' We're seeing repeated patterns. I think there's a lot more resegregation going on now — voluntary resegregation—than existed when the breakthroughs were being made in the '60s. And a lot of people who were active then are now solely concerned with trying to maintain their economic status. They don't want to remember the struggles of the past and they shield them from their children."

Yet while she is discouraged by all this, she is far from a picture of doom and despair. Says Joyce Ladner, researcher-writer-teacher-activist, one time and still sometimes "ambivalent sociologist:" "We've gone through the activist '60s. The '70s was described as the 'me' decade where people were very introspective and doing things for themselves. I hope that in the '80s we'll be able to develop new strategies based on earlier experiences and also readopt some of the older strategies that worked for us in the past.

"I do feel strongly that community-based activities are very important. I do feel strongly that those of us who by a stroke of luck are middle class and have the skills and resources to offer must involve ourselves in some sort of project that will help the less fortunate. I think the most important value I got from my mother and my father was the feeling that I must earn my space in this world. It is not automatically given to me. I must earn it."

Even as she looks around her and sees clusters of jobless Black men huddling on street corners, propped up by drugs and alcohol and empty dreams, even as she watches mere children pushing baby carriages, their own, even as she confronts evidence aplenty of societal indifference to the poor and downtrodden, she holds tight to a sustaining vision: "I'm a humanist. I believe that ultimately there's a lot of goodness or goodwill or whatever one may want to call it within human beings and that we *can* create the optimal conditions to bring that out. I'm not willing as a fellow human being to decide that any group of other human beings is permanently wiped out." □

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