Jones, N. (2018). *The Chosen Ones: Black Men and the Politics of Redemption*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. 248 pp. USD 29.95, ISBN: 9780520288355

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For decades, scholars have possessed an intellectual infatuation with the day to day social realities of ghettoized communities. Many social scientists who conduct fieldwork in distressed urban communities have historically been White, privileged, heterosexual males whose positionality limited their access and ability to contextualize obtained data. However, in *The Chosen Ones,* black feminist sociologist, Nikki Jones defies tradition. Through field research spanning from 2005 to 2010, Jones immerses herself in San Francisco's Fillmore, a predominantly black neighbourhood similar to others across the United States that have undergone dramatic social, political and economic changes over time. It is in this community where she observes firsthand the redemptive work of Black men working to save themselves by saving the next generation of Black men from the ills of the streets.

In Chapter 1, Jones introduces her main respondent, Eric, and provides an in-depth account of his evolution from street hustler to pastor, devoted Black father, and founder of Brothers Changing the Hood (BCH), a grassroots organization based in The Fillmore that is fighting on the front lines to save the neighbourhood. Like many Black men across America who grew up in urban ghettos, Eric's social milieu was characterized by poverty, family instability and crime; all consequences of racial, social and economic inequality that adversely affect the Black sub-proletariat. During his childhood, Eric was placed in special education which was the impetus that led toward a trajectory of labelling and exclusion by institutional actors such as teachers, principals and coaches. After years of exposure to, what Rios (2011) coins the *youth control complex*, Eric found solace in a 'street family' made up of peers involved in the neighbourhood underground economy. Eric's initiation into the underground economy started at age 14 during the

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height of a radical conservative wave of criminal justice policy. During this era, Black men in ghettoized neighbourhoods like The Fillmore were "the most vulnerable to the shift toward incarceration as the primary response to drug selling and possession" (p. 39). From adolescence up until his mid-20s, Eric would face personal dilemmas, brief incarceration stints, and fatherhood that presented an accumulation of awakening moments, moments that, over time, help push men like Eric across the half-and-half line that separates street and mainstream culture.

In Chapter 2, Jones chronicles the efforts of BCH to gain legitimacy within the 'crime-fighting community', i.e., the network of organizations in The Fillmore tasked with saving the neighbourhood from crime and violence. Within the crime-fighting community exist two separate and competing groups: the credentialed class and organic informal networks of those closely aligned with the street. The credentialed class is distinguished by their educational and professional qualifications, institutionalized efforts, and deference to city stakeholders and external funders. This group considers itself as the legitimate problem solvers of the community and is also accepted as such by powerful city stakeholders. However, the middle-class Blacks, who make up the credentialed class, aid in the social control of impoverished Blacks in the neighbourhood. Eric and other individuals more connected to residents and street-involved youth in The Fillmore see this group as engaging in the numbers game to secure funding and, most of all, their jobs. To grassroots community-based organizations like BCH, the often never-ending work is a calling and not a mere job. This calling to save the neighbourhood is part of the gradual, nonlinear redemptive process to atone for past wrongdoing and reclaim a place in the neighbourhood.

Chapter 3 explores the crux of how young Black men are targeted by anti-crime, anti-violence and anti-gang efforts often through assistance from the credentialed class within the crime-fighting community. The younger generation of Black men, who came of age after the 1980s, experienced a different method of crime control than the era Eric grew up in. Young Black men in The Fillmore, who came of age in the 1990s and onward, experienced an intrusion of the criminal legal apparatus in their communities while also being subjected to an expansion of bureaucratic forms of surveillance such as gang injunctions. The physical penetration of law enforcement in their daily lives acts as an "invisible cage" (p. 91) that controls their bodies and behaviours. Jones links Black men's vulnerability to dominance by the state to gendered violence they inflict on Black women and girls. She details how

law enforcement engages in routine acts of dominance such as stop-and-frisk and strip searches which violate the bodies of Black men. To Black men, searches like stop-and-frisk are a form of government that gives the state free reign to invade their bodies with impunity (Butler, 2017). While Black men are the primary focus of the book, an important contribution is Jones' inclusion of how oppressive policing practices in urban communities are implicated in the violence, aggression, and disrespect Black men direct toward Black women.

Chapter 4 shows how the idealized Black family is often the expectation many in the Black community, irrespective of gender, aspire to. Further, the disintegration and crisis facing inner-city Black communities are usually blamed on the absence or lack of 'real men' in the household. Hetero-normative assumptions of gender and family structure place an additional burden on Black men to subscribe to Black gender ideologies that define masculinity through the prism of dominance and physical prowess. Jones reveals how Black men like Eric embrace a redefined masculinity that allows them to use their bodies and dominance in situations outside of street life. Instead, these men – some of them biological fathers – serve as social fathers to young men in the neighbourhood and act as buffers from interpersonal and state violence on the one hand, while on the other, creating bridges to institutional resources that may help the young men grow personally. This chapter reveals the possibility of a redefined masculinity, opposed to the provider-protector role that often leads low-income Black men and fathers into street life.

Chapter 5 and the conclusion highlight previously covered themes and provide alternatives to the involvement of law enforcement and bureaucratic expansion of surveillance as primary responses to crime and violence in neighbourhoods like The Fillmore. Chapter 5 recounts the story of Jay, one of many Black men on the path for change who become casualties as a result of targeted criminalization, heightened surveillance, and toxic masculine behaviours that unfortunately make a deadly combination in distressed urban communities across America. In the conclusion, Jones makes a few recommendations that would revolutionize community-building efforts, especially in neighbourhoods plagued by violence. She envisions a redefining of Black gender ideologies that are liberating for men, women, and families and a crime-fighting community that builds the capacity of young people rather than aid in their exclusion and containment.

Jones does a masterful job exploring the process of redemption among street-involved Black men; a process that is neither linear nor solely an individual effort. Her critique of violence prevention programmes shows the ineffectiveness of such initiatives in making Black communities safer while exacerbating problems of crime and violence. *The Chosen Ones* is an important contribution at the intersection of race, crime, and justice and would be well suited for scholars and students of Criminology, Sociology, African American Studies, and Gender Studies. This book is scholarly in nature, yet, written in a fashion for the general public to understand. Contrary to scholarship that is primarily quantitative in nature, Jones' reliance on participant observation and ethnographic modalities of data collection are epistemologies embraced in the decolonization of criminology and justice.

References

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