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Chapter 3

“I Am Not a Prostitute”

How Young Black Women Challenge Sexual Harassment on the Street

At approximately eight thirty on a weekday morning a black man who appears to be in his late thirties approaches me as I sit at the rear of a city bus. His skin is a light brown complexion and he wears his dark curly hair in a short style. He is dressed in khakis, a white button-down shirt, and a wool coat, and he is carrying a black computer bag. He takes a seat right behind me in the very last row of the coach. Gripping the metal safety bar on the top of my seat with both hands he leans over my left shoulder and asks in a low voice, “How much are you charging for an hour?” In a mix of anger and frustration I quickly jolt my head around to face him and reply, “That’s not my business.” Not convinced, he goes on to inform me that he would “make it worth my while.” In a loud voice I reply, “I am not a prostitute.” He then scolds me for raising my voice: “You don’t have to get loud with me,” he says as he removes his sunglasses and looks me over once more while shaking his head.

At the time of this interaction I am riding the city bus along a central thoroughfare in West Oakland, an area that has long struggled with drug activity, poverty, and violence. The street is lined on one side with large industrial buildings and on the other with single-family homes and a few small apartment
buildings. I observe from the bus window a small park where men and women are asleep on benches and some are curled up on patches of brown grass; others stand talking and drinking from containers covered by paper bags. I see a few women standing along the sidewalk. Each of these women appears to be black, and they range in age from their late twenties to at least their mid-thirties. Two of the women stand together; others stand alone, with at least a block or so between them. Though this area is not the city’s central site for prostitution, it appears to attract what look to be a few sex workers in addition to those who look to be longtime drug abusers. These observations inform the interaction I have with the man on the bus. My experiences in the field indicate to me that I have been propositioned for sex. The man on the bus perceives me to be a sex worker, in part by evaluating my race, gender, and presence in this particular place; his perceptions and expectations are informed by what he understands each of those categories and the corresponding identity markers I display to him mean. After I tell him that I am not in the business of prostitution his idea about who and what I am keeps him from being so sure. This interaction was one of my earliest experiences in the field. Looking back, I realize I encountered a distinct type of microinteractional assault (MIA). I now see this encounter as a case of street-based MIAs that are part of the daily lives of many black women living in urban communities.

For numerous inner-city residents time spent walking along local streets is customary. A part of this routine action is the presence of street-based encounters and interactions with others. For many black women this means regular experiences with street-based MIAs. These assaults encompass what Deborah Tuerkheimer (1997) defines as street harassment: when a woman in public is intruded upon by a man’s words, noises, or gestures. Yet where others may use sexual harassment as an all-encompassing term to describe hostile gender-specific
encounters on the street, I unpack the meaning of these encounters for women in this setting and (re)conceptualize these encounters as microinteractional assaults. The use of the term *assault* in the description of these encounters highlights the shared context of violence for residents and how the experience with violence is shaped by gender. Men living in the inner city may be more vulnerable to gun violence while women are more vulnerable to gender-specific assaults in public space. Street-based MIAs include a range of negative interactional exchanges that reflect power differentials between black women and the men they encounter on the street. Unlike most consumer-based MIAs, many of these interactions are shaped by the act or threat of sexual violence. This includes sexualized comments and behavior made by boys and men who range in age from their teens to middle age. How do women make sense of the troubled encounters they have with men on the street? What strategies do women employ in an effort to manage routine threats of physical and sexual violence?

Dominant images of black women as hypersexual others play out in their experiences with street-based MIAs. Indeed, these “controlling images” (Collins 2005) of black women shape expectations and evaluations of who these women are and are not. With each encounter these women are reminded of their unequal status. Controlling images reinforce black women’s status as available to men, making them vulnerable to inappropriate and harmful social behavior. As oppressive images are continuously reproduced they shape black women’s encounters with others, including street-based public interactions. Through these interactions the marginalization of black women continues to operate on the interpersonal level.

In this chapter, I also examine the particular strategies that women use to manage street-based MIAs. The defensive strategies at work differ when performed beyond consumer-based
MIAs and outside the boundaries of local businesses. I concentrate on how these tactics operate within street-based encounters beyond the margins of civility that often come with consumer-based interactions. I first examine the strategic work I refer to as interactional resistance: how women speak and act out in response to experiences of public assault. The second strategy is what I call buffering. This tactic is a form of interactional resistance and operates as a type of physical and psychological shielding, as protection from the hurt and degradation that accompanies street-based MIAs. In addition, buffering helps individuals recover from experiences with troubled encounters.

Understanding Sexual Violence

Within the U.S. social order there is a history of raced and gendered subordination. This oppression influences contemporary social interactions as well as evaluations of marginalized persons. A current example of one way this subordination has an impact on black womanhood is through the experiences of living within a culture of rape. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) contends that rape is much more than a single act; rather, it comprises a multitude of sexual assaults on black womanhood. This includes sexual harassment, both verbal and physical; sexual extortion; stranger, intimate partner, and acquaintance rape; and widely held misogynistic beliefs about women. Through consciously or unconsciously adopting this rape culture framework, the conditions under which women are objectified and abused become reinforced. The key component of this culture and its extremely harmful consequences is female domination. Largely, American beliefs about masculinity rely upon male dominance over women sexually, physically, and institutionally. For black women and men who already experience mainstream racial oppression, this type of gender ideology allows for intraracial gender domination targeting black women. This is done in an effort to develop and
maintain a masculine identity for black men, whose maleness is consistently challenged within a racist social structure. In this context, domination of black women by black men seems like a logical step in the American social order of operations. In part, this step mirrors the dominant image of male power over women.

Black women become extremely vulnerable within a gender ideology where black men are fighting for a routinely oppressed mainstream masculine status. For black men to capture and maintain this status while managing life in a disadvantaged inner-city community, women can become targets of sexually predatory male behavior. This behavior can come at the hands of young men as they struggle to develop a masculine identity or older men who struggle to prove, and in some cases rebuild, their masculine identity (Collins 2005; Sheffield 1987, 177).

The routine mass media portrayals of black women employing a variety of controlling images work to reinforce the widespread internalization of them as subordinate and worthy of oppression and assault. This increases their vulnerability to street-based MIAs at the hands of black men in their neighborhoods. The added complication of lower-class status and the daily lived oppressions that come with it intensify the urgency of many men to claim their masculine status, even to the detriment of black women. Understanding assaults on black womanhood through the context of a rape culture underscores the severity of sexual dominance against black women (Collins 2005, 228–232). This concept reveals the long-standing systemic nature of sexual violence against black women. In addition, it tells of the far-reaching critical consequences of the history of institutionalized rape and oppression of black men.

When considering the ways in which female domination is a central component in maintaining the larger culture of rape, we are reminded of the pivotal role of violence—both
actual and threatened. Carole J. Sheffield (1987) denotes “sexual terrorism” as a system of fear—specifically, fear of personal injury. When women experience fear they become dominated by the fear-inducing entity reinforcing their social control. Black women must endure the potentially violent trauma of both racism and sexual violence; both forms of oppression are a part of the same structure designed to keep them subordinate. In the context of rape, historically a black woman could not be raped, assaulted, or sexually exploited in any way by any man under U.S. law. This status of being “unrapable” marked black women and girls as essentially inferior (Sheffield 1987, 171–180).

Through the accounts of daily experiences with these troubled encounters, women in East Oakland have described potentially violent encounters as well as how they see themselves as vulnerable to sexual assault. Jocelyn A. Hollander explains that this vulnerability to violence is a central element of femininity; women’s vulnerability is constructed through routine interactions where dominant ideas about gender are communicated, performed, and thus reinforced (2001, 84). For women in East Oakland, vulnerability is shaped via day-to-day interactions that often unfold on the street. These interactions are a reminder of the significant relationship between the body and violence, including threats of violence and the routine accomplishment of gender. A key component in the vulnerability of young women in the context of sexual violence is that they are often seen to be at a peak of sexual desirability. This perception of heightened risk is a result of the intersection of their gender, age, and sexuality (Hollander 2001, 84–95).

The victimization experienced by young women and the particular kinds of strategies they use to manage violence or attempt to avoid it are specifically shaped by their status as both young and women (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004, 27; Wesely 2006, 305). The ways in which women negotiate instances or
potential instances of sexual assault and other forms of personal injury are directly influenced by structural inequalities like gender, race, and class oppression. These factors combine to further complicate the daily lives of young women, including how they negotiate interpersonal violence. In several cases women react to violent attacks directed toward them by meeting their assailant with violence of their own in the form of self-defense (Wesely 2006).

Though some women have used violence as a successful form of self-defense when being threatened by an attacker, Hollander (2009) found mixed reactions from participants of whether or not they believe formal self-defense training strengthens a woman’s ability to resist. In evaluation research more broadly, self-defense training has proven to be a strong intervention in preventing stranger violence against women specifically sexual violence. Yet Hollander found in her study three forms of resistant reactions by participants regarding women engaging in formal self-defense training. The first is the “impossible” reaction, which states that it is impossible for women in general to physically overpower a male attacker, even though research has shown that nearly 75 percent of intended rape victims fight off their assailant or escape. The second reaction is that self-defense training is “too dangerous”; the idea here is that formal training will encourage women to enter potentially dangerous situations because they believe they can defend themselves as well as begin to violently attack men. This reaction implies that women are not rational enough to judge when and where to put their self-defense training to use. The third reaction to women’s formal self-defense training is “victim blaming,” which implies that women are responsible for protecting themselves against assault and also responsible for controlling the violence of attackers. Though women cannot control men’s violence and should not be held responsible to do so, formal self-defense training has proven to be an effective form of deterrence for
men and personally empowering for women. These three reactions represent mainstream cultural ideas about gender and, in particular, they reinforce ideas about women being weak and irrational. Self-defense challenges the ideas that many people see as “natural,” thus challenging extant gendered hierarchies (Hollander 2009).

For the women in the present study, formal self-defense training is a luxury that is unavailable. These women develop their own strategies to negotiate MIAs with men on the street. They have learned to manage daily encounters where their personal safety is at risk by developing their own methods of defense while living with feelings of fear and vulnerability. This already complicated project is intensified by distressed community conditions. These women are at tremendous risk for personal injury in the inner city; each day they must work to negotiate their safety, which is not guaranteed.

Everyday Encounters with Street-Based Microinteractional Assaults

Street-based MIAs described in this chapter are different from consumer-oriented MIAs in a number of ways. First, these interactional exchanges occur outside the boundaries of local businesses. The experiences associated with consumer-oriented assaults are largely contained by the physical boundaries of the establishment in which they occur, although the resultant social injury is often carried with a person beyond these physical boundaries. Different from harassment, street-based MIAs highlight the role of violence within these interactions. Once on the street in East Oakland, there are limited physical barriers between persons. In addition, the code of civility that can be a part of interactions that unfold inside businesses does not apply in the same way to street encounters. The form of public courtesy that is expected to operate on the street is what Erving Goffman
calls “civil inattention.” This form of visual recognition of another’s presence is designed to display a casual and brief appreciation of the other in this space without showing any special curiosity (1963, 83–88). Women in the neighborhood experience violations of this expectation of civil inattention in the form of street-based MIAs. Such violations occur repeatedly, and the belief that civil law will not provide adequate protection makes these women particularly vulnerable on the street.

Here the street is primarily regulated by what Elijah Anderson (1999) notes is the “code of the street.” Behavior on the part of many who live in the inner city is governed by the threat of violence or confrontation. For women, in particular, behavior is often influenced by the threat of physical as well as sexual violence. The second way in which street-based MIAs differ from consumer-oriented MIAs is that for women these street-based encounters typically involve sexual harassment and threats of sexual violence. My respondents’ accounts and observations include cases of name-calling, physical violence, and unwanted sexual invitation.

The following account from Shante, a woman in her early twenties, illustrates a common way in which street-based MIAs occur. I asked Shante what kinds of experiences she has had with men on the street, and she described how men approach her as she walks through East Oakland:

Typically, when I am walking down the street around here guys act like dogs. They yell “Hey girl” to get me to turn around, but if I ignore them they start calling me all out of my name [derogatory name calling]. It happens all the time. It’s like they’re always saying something foul; if it’s at least two of them out on the corner, then you know they probably got something to say to you. It don’t matter what you’re doing or if you’re just going about your business. They either hollering about how they want to “get with
you,” or if you reject them, they talk all kinds of shit about you and why you are just a bitch just ‘cause you don’t want them.

Shante’s account illustrates how women don’t have to be engaged in a traditional one-on-one interaction in order to be a target of forceful male behavior in public; just being present in urban public space as a woman managing multiple categorical identities is enough to be singled out and treated aggressively. The type of interaction that Shante describes is common for women in the inner city. Such interactions generally unfold as three steps in one of two scenarios: as invitation—refusal of invitation—escalation, or as invitation—acceptance of invitation—civil public interaction.

The encounter begins with an invitation. In Shante’s case, the men on the street began to yell “Hey girl” in an effort to gain her attention. Other types of invitations include verbalizing evaluations of women such as “You really wearing that dress” or “You’re too pretty to be out here standing at the bus stop.” Some invitations are also physical, like grabbing a woman’s arm as she walks down the street. Each form of invitation is intended to catch the attention of the woman targeted and is commonly followed by a refusal. In this case, Shante chose to refuse the invitation by ignoring the men’s advance. Often women in this setting refuse invitations by men they don’t know, just as Shante did. But some cases show women engaging in what appears to be casual conversation with men who approach them on the street. This is considered an acceptance of the invitation. In turn, the acceptance results in what appears to be a causal conversation, also a form of civil public interaction. Finally, it is significant to note that there is always a level of unpredictability within such interactions. As a result, some street-based MIAs may unfold in a less predictable manner than those reflected in the patterns described here.
More commonly, invitations are met with refusals that take the form of a woman ignoring both the request and the men extending the invitation by quickly walking away from the space or averting the gaze of those trying to gain notice. Once a refusal of an invitation occurs, the interaction often begins to escalate. Escalation routinely takes the form of verbal disputes where yelling and name-calling are central. Verbal escalation may be initiated by either party and is sometimes engaged in by both. Shante described how this particular interaction began to escalate in response to her refusal. At this point the men began to verbally assault her with derogatory names; she continued to refuse their initial invitation by not verbally engaging in the interaction. The escalation seems to gain momentum when there is more than one man in the audience, as the presence of other male friends or acquaintances seems to encourage the progression of this type of interaction. In these types of cases it is significant for some young men to prove their manhood to others—both to peers and any women present—by asserting their male dominance. This can take the form of brutal name-calling, such as referring to the woman as “bitch,” “ho,” or “freak” or through physical violence, such as grabbing the body parts of the woman targeted. The presence of a small group works to reinforce the dominant male status of the men involved in the interaction while magnifying the woman’s subordinate female status. With the presence of other men this encounter becomes more than a one-on-one interaction; it develops into a kind of interactional performance in which others can become a part, escalating it either verbally or physically, or simply bearing witness as the interaction unfolds. Finally, in the cases where women outnumber a man, initiating an invitation can escalate to the point of physical violence. In these encounters some women have aggressively refused invitations and further responded by attacking the man and
engaging in a public beating. Usually in cases like this the man is significantly older than the women targeted and is assumed to pose less of a physical threat than a much younger man.

The following case of a one-on-one interaction unfolds in the same pattern as the encounter Shante described. Tiffany, a young woman, described an episode she had with a man on the street that began with an invitation, was followed by her refusal, and concluded with an escalation. This interaction began as Tiffany exited a neighborhood store carrying baby formula; as she prepared to cross the street, a shiny blue sedan screeched to a stop before her and abruptly interrupted her path. Tiffany stared angrily at the driver suddenly blocking her pathway, and she noted the big smile on his face when he exited his car and approached her as she tried to walk away:

I just tried to ignore him, the way he was looking at me was like I was naked or something. He kept saying, “You with the big booty, I want to talk to you,” but I just kept on walking. Then he called me a ho with a fucked-up attitude, and I got really hot [angry], but then I was just like, forget it, it ain’t even worth it. I was so mad ’cause he doesn’t even know me and he thinks it’s okay to talk about my ass to my face like that. The twisted thing is he thinks it’s a compliment, but then if I don’t act like I like it I got to be a ho with a fucked-up attitude.

In this encounter the man used his vehicle as a way to initiate an invitation. By blocking Tiffany’s path across the street, her movement was stalled, and this allowed him the opportunity to follow up with a verbal invitation demanding that she talk to him. The use of a vehicle as a physical barrier restricting the young woman’s mobility even for a moment, complicated by the stranger making demands of her, symbolize ways in which gendered inequality manifests in daily interactions.
on the street. Tiffany rejected the invitation by ignoring the man and his demands. Her act of ignoring his demands is a form of resistance to his harassment. This refusal prompted an escalation where the man verbally assaulted her with offensive speech and name-calling. His reaction is a lived consequence of her rejection to this unwanted behavior.

This interaction was surely rooted in some troubling assumptions about gender. Tiffany, like all women who negotiate public space, shared a sense of vulnerability. Yet because she is young, Tiffany did not experience the protection that can come with being of an older age and considered less sexually available. In addition, she was not guarded by the privilege that can accompany a higher social status than the working-class standing that she claims. The man in the encounter seemed to understand Tiffany in the context of black female promiscuity. In her refusal to take part in this script, and in her rejection of his expression of hyper-heterosexual masculinity, the escalation intensified (Collins 2005, 115). The verbal assault worsened, but in an effort to keep the escalation from the point of possible physical violence, Tiffany walked away, though infuriated.

Black gender ideologies that replicate dominant racist ideas about what it means to be poor, black, and female play out in troubling ways, as the accounts of experiences shared by Tiffany and Shante illustrate. Both women noted frustration at being called indecent names by men on the street. In response to being called out in this way Shante used rejection as a defensive tool against the men hollering at her. In her account it seems that rejecting the sexual invitations of men, particularly in a public space, was extremely upsetting for them and in their eyes justification to call her a bitch. This back-and-forth interaction resembles a struggle for power in the poor urban neighborhood, where residents are often deemed powerless. The young men who attacked Shante with their words were
fighting to bring into being their historically castrated black masculinity. Simultaneously, Shante was fighting her own oppression as a poor black woman subject to abuse; she rejected the attempt at male dominance by putting down the sexual invitation and challenging the young men’s heteronormative masculinity. Yet she noted how this “happens all the time.” Such oppressive acts imposed upon her black womanhood are routine encounters in this setting (Collins 2005, chap. 7; Jones 2010, chap. 4).

The encounters Tiffany and Shante described are routine in the inner city and reflect Goffman’s concept of “regular occasions,” which are explained as a unit that grows every time a similar occasion takes place, making the unit a stronger and more familiar cycle of events (1963, 19). In this way MIAs form a blanket of interactional injury in women’s lives. Tiffany and Shante illustrate through their experiences how street-based MIAs become regular occasions for women in this setting, a routine component of their daily life.

Tiffany and Shante’s experiences also raise questions about the meanings and perceptions of youth, femaleness, blackness, and poverty by others when one is out in public. Tiffany went on to further explain her experience, making clear, “I’m not afraid of anybody, I can’t afford to be; but I also can’t fight everybody who says or does something out of line to me or else I would be fighting most of the time.” One of the troubling elements in these interactions is the expectation that these women will willingly accept the assumption that they are available to the men they encounter. This assumption of availability underscores Collins’s idea of asserting and maintaining domination within a culture of rape (2005, chap. 7). The way that the young black man approaches this young black woman on the street is informed by his own experiences of subordinated masculinity. In an effort to reclaim his masculinity he chooses to encounter this woman in a specific way that reinforces how
she is often seen through the dominant lens, as the available hypersexual other. One way this is expressed is by making reference to her by her body parts. This stage of the interaction is what I call invitation. At this point actions are displayed to get and maintain the attention of the woman involved. The next step is the refusal. An example of how the refusal can operate is shown in Tiffany challenging the assertion of dominance the man displayed by ignoring him and walking away.

The final stage of this type of interaction is the escalation. This is illustrated when the man involved reacted by calling Tiffany out as a “ho with a fucked-up attitude,” using language to further demean her status as a black woman and simultaneously protect his immediately challenged status as a “real man.” These encounters show the microlevel operation of controlling images. The women sharing these encounters are in a way being told who they are and who they are not as they simply walk down the street in their own neighborhood. The men trying to get their attention are verbalizing the larger social indoctrination of who they are said to be as young black women living in an urban community. (Collins 2000, chap. 4; Costa Vargas 2006, 23).

Living in a troubled East Oakland neighborhood and managing your daily tasks sends a message to those you encounter about who you are and who you are not. These women are marked as unequal due to their gender, race, class, and age categories and as a result are subject to the availability of men in this space. They become prey to the inappropriate and harmful social behavior and advances of others. For the women whose encounters and accounts are represented in this study, such behavior has become constant and often unavoidable.

Carol Brooks Gardener notes how public harassment of women by men symbolically reinforces male rights and social control without considerable consequence. This type of behavior in public simply underscores and supports women’s vulner-
ability to other social problems like domestic abuse, rape, and sexual harassment in both the public and private spheres. This type of public social abuse of women is common, and many women have come to expect it; and too many men have become well versed in executing it (Gardener 1995, 86–88). This mutual understanding of giving and receiving abuse reinforces the experiences recounted by the women who live in East Oakland, a point illustrated in Shante’s portrayal of her interaction with a group of men. When asked about her experiences with men on the street, Shante stated that “guys act like dogs” and then went on to give a description of what men do in interactions with women on the street and how this angers her. She implied that this is the understood way of being for young men in this context, emphasizing that being yelled at and called foul names by male passersby attempting to get her attention occurs routinely, even when she is minding her own business.

The following story recounts nineteen-year-old Kira’s experience with street-based MIAs as she walks through Sunny side each day:

Every day for the past few weeks I see these same guys on the corner. It’s usually three, sometimes four of them at a time. At first when I would walk past them on my way to the bus stop, one of them would be like “Hi, how you doing,” “You look good,” or “When you gonna give me your (telephone) number?” and I wouldn’t say anything, just keep on walking. Then after, like, two weeks of passing them every day, one of the guys seemed to get all angry and one day was like, “You think you too good to talk to me? You ugly anyway.” So I still didn’t say anything, I just kept walking and ignoring them. Then one day the same guy saw me walking toward them and started talking crazy and was getting loud so I could hear him. He said, “Here come that little stuck-up ho, don’t nobody
want your ho ass anyway,” and then they all started laughing. So then I couldn’t take it no more, so I started yelling and screaming and cussing him out. He just kept saying, “Girl, get out my face; don’t make me hit you.”

Kira’s report displays the routine nature of sexually harassing speech from men in her neighborhood. This interaction is an example of a daily street-based microinteractional assault. Kira described how her interactions with this small congregation of young men in public began to escalate over a period of weeks. After she initially tried to ignore their advances, the encounters become increasingly antagonistic. These men who did not know her, except that she passed them each day, repeatedly made advances toward her. When she responded to their remarks with silence she refuted their attempts at asserting masculinity while their peers looked on. As a result, the comments become increasingly hostile. With each subsequent interaction Kira worked to protect herself from having the encounter turn into an altercation by remaining silent. One of the young men seemed increasingly irritated by her response (or lack thereof). It is likely that he felt his masculine identity being further challenged by Kira’s silence. Being in the presence of his peers and struggling to avoid humiliation by this young woman increased his annoyance with her and thus increased his desire to further objectify her and put her down. Finally, one of the young men made a last attempt at displaying his male dominance over Kira and the space she passes through by calling her a “stuck-up ho” whom “nobody wants.”

This personal attack ignited Kira’s angry reaction: cursing at the man in front of his peers, further injuring his masculine identity. He concluded with a threat, “don’t make me hit you.” The way in which this threat of violence is made placed Kira at fault if the man hits her. The structure of this remark under-
scores the presence of female victimization in urban space: as Kira spoke out in her own defense, the young man worked to silence her through a threat of physical violence.

The element of Kira’s interaction that makes it different from the earlier cases discussed is that it unfolded continuously over a matter weeks. The encounter follows the pattern of invitation–refusal–escalation, though as Kira related, the escalation increased to the point of a threat of physical assault. This is unlike the previous interactions that generally display invitation–refusal–escalation in one day during a single interaction, though it is significant to note that like each other case this account illustrates how female subordination is a central component to these routine interactions. This is made visible through routine instances of gender-specific verbal assault.

These types of encounters place black women in a sort of lose–lose situation as they try to negotiate urban public space. If they try to ignore the harassment, it gets worse; and if they call attention to the harasser’s behavior by staging a turnabout and deferring the attention back to him, their personal safety is put in jeopardy. The fragility of a woman’s personal safety in this setting is illustrated in the following account from Nicole, a twenty-one-year-old mother of a two-year-old daughter. I asked Nicole if she has had any encounters with men in the neighborhood who appear older than her, and she told me of an encounter with a middle-aged black man while she waited at a bus stop in her East Oakland neighborhood. “It was early one morning in the winter,” she explained. “The weather was cold and raining and it was still dark outside. I was holding my daughter as we stood in this doorway trying to stay dry. This man who looked old enough to be my father was walking by and slowed down to say, ‘You are too pretty to be out here by yourself this time of morning. A man like me could take you in that alley and tear you up [sexually assault you].’ He shook his head and smiled as he walked away.”
Nicole described this encounter as “scary,” adding, “The worst part about it is that I felt trapped. I was holding my daughter, who was asleep; it was raining and dark and it wasn’t like I could scream and someone would do something, because there was no one around.” Nicole’s feelings of being trapped and scared are a direct reaction to the threats made by a man as he passed her on the street. These threats symbolize his dominant male status in this local street hierarchy. Nicole later explained to me that she responded to this man’s remarks with silence out of fear of making the situation worse. She mentioned how she was trying to think of how to get away from him if she had to, while keeping her daughter safe. Nicole described an intuitive understanding of how rejection leads to escalation. Simultaneously, her daughter is being socialized into what it means to be a poor black girl in this setting. Nicole described how, after the man walked away, she “sort of froze” at the thought of what could have happened to her and her child. Her encounter with a strange man on the street is certainly a threatening one. Her personal safety and that of her young child were at risk at that moment. Further, the man insinuated that if she were in this same circumstance again, a man like him could “tear her up.” This interaction is an example of a street-based microinteractional assault that is informed by the threat of sexual violence. With each interaction the role of women as the “devalued other” is intensified (Collins 2005, 187). As the re-creation of this subordinated status through daily interactions occurs repeatedly, hegemonic masculinity is reinforced. Women trying to manage daily tasks in disadvantaged communities must often struggle to do so, in part because of experiences of routine microassaults. It is assaults like this one, in addition to the types of MIAs discussed in chapter 2, that make negotiating already troubled circumstances even more challenging and dangerous. This interaction is a reminder of how inner-city neighborhoods are governed
by the “code of the street” (Anderson 1999). Events like this highlight the gendered dimensions of the code: that men primarily worry about physical violence while women must contend with the threat of physical violence and sexual violence as they navigate urban public space each day.

Controlling Images and Gendered Violence

In Collins’s (2000) discussion of controlling images as they relate to black women’s oppression, she points out how widely accepted stereotypical images like the sexually aggressive whore and the welfare queen are designed to make multiple forms of oppression seem natural and expected parts of daily life. As racism, poverty, sexism, and other social injustices prevail, so does this othering of black women. It is this “other” status that clarifies the boundaries by which dominant groups define what is normal and what is not. Controlling images are one of the most significant tools at work in daily interactions and larger social institutions; these images invoke degrading stereotypes that are used to substantiate the imposed marginalization of oppressed groups.

Previous research on gender and public harassment has revealed the harsh reality of public space for those who are situationally disadvantaged. Public space belongs to everyone and no one simultaneously (Gardener 1995). It is a place that is theoretically civil to all people but in reality a place where many are ridiculed and put down. It is here where people experience threats of violence, injury, and rejection. Evidence shows that not everyone receives equal treatment (Gardener 1995, 44). Specifically, in underserved neighborhoods where resources are often severely limited, the situation can increase the struggle of managing threatening encounters for the black women who live there.

In her study on African American girls, urban inequality, and gendered violence, Jody Miller describes gender “as a
structural, interactional, and symbolic source of inequality” (2008, 2). Miller highlights how gender is rarely portrayed or understood in this way. In the United States, where violence against women and girls is systematic, Miller points out how this reality is even more severe in our nation’s disadvantaged communities. East Oakland, a predominantly black distressed community, is similar to poor inner-city neighborhoods throughout the United States. The women who live in Sunnyside do their best to negotiate this troubled environment each day as they receive little or no institutional or social support. The services and support systems that are available prove to be largely insufficient in keeping women safe. With poor communities comes the long history of raced and classed oppression that impacts men, women, and children. As a result, underground networks of prostitution, drug sales, gang affiliations, and other forms of alternative work that often prove to be unsafe spring up in many communities. Many become forced into these networks after being isolated from mainstream employment opportunities that produce a livable wage.

For some young men living in troubled urban neighborhoods, being a part of this type of alternative workforce can operate as a way of developing and performing masculinity. Here street reputation has a lot to do with their masculine identity construction. Creating a masculine street reputation that garners respect from peers is significant for many young men; developing this type of self-presentation means displaying an image of toughness, independence, willingness to use violence, and heterosexual expertise illustrated through sexual conquest (Anderson 1999). Many young women become subject to degradation and street harassment as young men work to build a masculine identity and local status. Much of this street work is directly linked to the visible objectification of and violence against women, including verbal, physical, and intimate partner abuse. The organizational characteristics of urban street
networks often produce gender inequality. The majority of this work, specifically in the leadership roles of pimp, drug dealer, hustler, and the like, is male dominated. For the women living in communities with active underground networks public space can be complicated and often unsafe to navigate from day to day. It appears that severe poverty within disadvantaged neighborhoods is what structures the high risk for gendered violence that African American young women experience.¹

Strategies of Resistance

Troubled interactions on the street further complicate managing inner-city life for many black women. Every day, women must make a choice of how to negotiate these kinds of encounters—through avoidance, engagement, or resistance, with the latter shown to be common. Resistance is a contributing factor in how many MIAs unfold. Two essential features of resistance are action and opposition. These overt forms of counteraction are intentional on the part of the actor and recognized by the target. Resistance is fundamentally interactional and defined by an actor’s perception of her own behavior as well as by the recognition and reaction of the target. When considering how resistance operates, it is crucial to point out the central role of power in interactions where resistance takes place (Hollander and Einwohner 2004, 547–548). When negotiating MIAs with men on the street, my respondents repeatedly work to resist dominant race, gender, and classed ideologies as well as power dynamics that frame this type of interaction and the real threats to their well-being.

Two primary tactics employed by women to negotiate and defend against street-based MIAs are interactional resistance and buffering. Interactional resistance is the verbal or physical confrontation or opposition to a microinteractional assault and to the person(s) carrying it out. Interactional resistance is the larger strategic category that encompasses buffering.
Buffering is a form of interactional resistance that includes both physical and psychological shielding against interactional pain, discomfort, and hostility. Although buffering is not intended to be as confrontational as interactional resistance, both approaches are grounded in self-defense as a response to street harassment. The action of buffering works to reduce the impact of uneasy interactions without initiating an aggressive conflict. Psychological buffering can consist of normalizing a situation or behavior—for instance, telling oneself “it happens all the time” or “that’s just the way it is.” Physical buffering can take the form of physically shielding one’s body from an interactional assault or verbally defending oneself in a way that generally reflects civil public interaction. While buffering reflects what some describe as avoidance, what I conceptualize as physical buffering can involve women using local convenient stores and takeout restaurants as physical barriers between themselves and potentially troubling public encounters. Interactional resistance more broadly includes verbally admonishing the actions and/or words used by one person to assault another. This form of verbal resistance can easily escalate to a physical dispute, which can in turn also be an act of interactional resistance. In this study I observe both physical, and more commonly, verbal confrontations in response to MIAs.

The forms of resistance that women take up are acts of self-preservation; they work to resist and buffer oneself from routine MIAs as an intrinsic form of physical and emotional protection. Yet there are consequences to such resistance. In many cases women are in a lose-lose situation. Though opposition to MIAs is common, these incidents still occur repeatedly. In some cases resistance can worsen the level of escalation in an interaction, causing a greater threat of personal injury. This includes opening women up to intensified verbal assault and the threat and/or act of physical and sexual violence. Acts
of resistance defy mainstream gendered expectations of women and girls to submit to male dominance, and defying such expectations results in punishment. The process of expectation–violation–punishment is a routine element of these daily MIAs. Each time this series of actions takes place, dominant gender ideologies and inequality are reproduced.

*Interactional Resistance*

Women verbally and sometimes physically defend themselves when engaged in street-based MIAs. Some of the defensive acts they perform include cursing, yelling, name-calling, pushing, and hitting. The following excerpt from my field notes shows how a girl in her mid-teens performs interactional resistance while waiting at a bus stop:

I observe from a short distance as a young girl waits patiently at the bus stop. She leans her body against the metal pole where the bus schedule is posted. As she waits, I observe her reading a book. Periodically she looks up from the pages and glances around, then goes back to her book. As she reads, I notice two teenage boys walking down the street in her direction. One of the boys swings a plastic soda bottle in one hand as he walks and talks to the boy beside him. As they get closer to where the girl stands, the boy with the soda bottle puts his index finger over his lips indicating to his friend to be quiet as they reach the bus stop. The teenage girl is looking down at her book when the boy hits the girl on her butt with the soda bottle as he passes by. Almost instantly the girl turns and punches the boy in the arm, and he laughs in response. “Damn girl, I was just playing,” he says.

“You think you funny, James, and you’re not. I’m not playing with you. Do it again and see what happens,” the girl replies.
“Man, whatever. Bitches be trippin’,” the boy says to his friend, who nods his head in agreement but remains quiet as they walk away.

When the boy gets the teenage girl’s attention by touching her inappropriately, she immediately confronts his behavior with both physical and verbal acts of interactional resistance: she hits the boy in the arm and dares him to repeat the behavior to “see what happens.” As she defends herself in this way the boy quickly retorts in his own defense that he was “just playing.” Though the boy does not physically retaliate after she hits him and challenges him to “do it again,” he reacts by saying “bitches be trippin’,” thus referring to her as a bitch. It seems that though he doesn’t really want to fight this girl physically, he does want to save face while maintaining his sense of masculine identity, particularly in front of his friend. The boy goes about saving face by asserting that the girl is a bitch because she didn’t like, or passively accept, him violating her body and personal space by touching her inappropriately. Miller points out that within the context of sexually violent behavior, women experience very gender-specific risks in public, and their experiences of violence and harassment can and often do take on characteristics of “public spectacle” (2008, 35). The interaction of the girl and the boy at the bus stop becomes a spectacle of sorts, as it is a troubled interaction including unwanted touching, name-calling, and argumentative responses on public display for all passersby to see. This type of interaction illustrates how street-based MIAs are “regular” occasions (Goffman 1963, 19) that sometimes, but not always, take on the form of spectacle.

The teenage girl in this interaction acknowledges that the boy who wrongfully touches her while on the street is “playing” and is trying to be “funny.” A part of her verbal form of
interactional resistance makes this known while at the same time plainly stating that his efforts to be funny were unsuccessful and in no way does she accept his acts as playfulness. A part of the teenage boy being able to explain away his behavior as a joke that should be happily accepted reinforces his dominant male status within the system of gendered street hierarchy—a hierarchy that places women subordinate to men and keeps them situationally disadvantaged (Miller 2008, 39). This less than status experienced by women and girls is largely accepted by men on the streets of distressed inner-city communities, underscoring the assumed sexual availability of women and girls in such a setting. The teenage boy’s assertion that this girl is a “bitch” illustrates that he has made an evaluation of who she is during the encounter. This oppressive evaluation is informed by her rejection of him inappropriately touching her body while in public. In addition, dominant perceptions of her categorical identities, including race, class, and gender, further inform evaluations made about who she is—in this interaction and beyond. Without social and legal services in place to help minimize cases of street harassment and street-based sexual violence, they will persist. The following account by Angel, an 18-year-old high school student, describes how she employs interactional resistance when a middle-aged man approached her and two of her friends as he was smoking outside a local bar one weekday afternoon:

Me and two of my friends were walking home and we passed Doug’s Lounge—it’s this grimy bar or whatever. This old man—like, fifties—was outside smoking a cigarette. He was smiling and showing his missing teeth on the side of his mouth. Anyway, as we was walking by he goes, “Hey ladies, what y’all doing later tonight?”

“Not talking to you,” I said.
“Oh I like that, you gotta smart mouth and a fast ass. You, come over here and let daddy show you what he gon’ put in your smart mouth.”

I was like, oh hell no, I am not the one, so me and my girls all looked at each other and then we rushed his dirty old ass. We started punching him and kicking him till he was on the ground. He started screaming “Stop, stop!” and then some people from the bar came out and pulled us off of him. But I didn’t care, ’cause we got him good, and he deserved it.

In this account Angel illustrates the role of escalation in the interaction. We see what began as an unwanted advance develop into a threat of sexual assault. Angel’s account depicts a rare encounter of women using physical aggression in retaliation, an act that violates norms of femininity. Interactional resistance is performed here both verbally and physically. First, Angel refuses the man’s initial advance, which he appears to be using as both a question—“Hey ladies, what y’all doing tonight?”—and an informal invitation. Angel quickly replies, “Not talking to you,” which implies that she and her friends are not interested in talking to him at the time of question or at any other time. The man seems put off by Angel’s sharp reply, and reacts by making an evaluation of her. He states that she has a “smart mouth,” which she doesn’t seem overly bothered by. Yet it is the evaluation of her being a “fast ass,” insinuating that she is promiscuous, followed by a threat of a sexually violent act, that prompts her and her friends to physically attack him. The order in which the evaluation and then the threat are made is significant. Some informing components that help this man make a swift evaluation of who Angel is include her race, class, gender, and social location in addition to her sharp reply to his advance, determining for him that she is both hypersexual and deserving of threats of sexual violence.
At the moment Angel and her friends attack their perpetrator physically, the gender hierarchy becomes inverted through the form of retaliation or street justice that the girls take up. Yet as the young women use physical aggression as a way of defending themselves from verbal assault and threats of sexual assault, they also reinforce stereotypes about poor black women: the aggression they exhibit exemplifies dominant ideas about the violent and impulsive angry black woman (Logan 2011). The lived outcomes of such oppressive evaluations can make managing daily life in inner-city communities even more complicated than it already is for the black women who live in them.

Buffering

Traveling in and out of distressed urban neighborhoods is complicated for female residents. One of the ways in which they negotiate and manage routine street-based MIAs is through buffering. Both physical and psychological buffering work to assist them in maintaining safety while negotiating daily travel and residence in the inner-city space. Twenty-year-old Amaya describes one way in which she routinely employs physical buffering as she travels through the East Oakland neighborhood where she lives: “When I walk down Third Avenue, I try to always be with somebody else. During the day it’s not too bad. The guys hanging outside do say nasty stuff and try to be slick and touch you when you go by, but at night or really early in the morning that’s when it’s rough out here. That’s when girls get snatched up.” In this account, Amaya tells of how she tries to stay safe as she walks through her neighborhood each day. She describes using physical buffering by not walking along this street alone. Amaya employs Gardener’s concept of adopting strategic protectors as a way of buffering herself from unwanted encounters with men on the street. Gardener proposes that appearing in public places with a companion may discourage
harassment (1995, 206–208). Amaya explains that not being alone when passing men on this street helps to keep her safe from what she describes as being “snatched up” or from more severe sexual assaults. The local understanding of being “snatched up” alludes to kidnapping and forced prostitution; the threat of both structures women’s’ daily lives. In the street, accompaniment may prevent some—but not all—inappropriate remarks or unwanted touching.

A significant component of Amaya’s experience with street-based MIAs is that she has ranked the different types of microinteractional assaults that she is familiar with in this community and has evaluated them based on what she understands to be more or less dangerous. In a casual tone she mentions that during the day, when primarily inappropriate comments and touching occur, it’s “not too bad.” She is, however, regularly reminded of her subordinate status as she is subjected to unwanted touching and remarks when walking through her neighborhood. She goes on to describe that cases of being “snatched up” or severely sexually assaulted demonstrate when it is “rough out here.” It is critical for Amaya and other black women in inner-city communities to be keenly aware of their surroundings—including when, where, and how different kinds of MIAs take place—in an effort to ensure their own personal safety. Nevertheless, it is important to note that such ranking is also a form of psychological buffering. Amaya has chosen to protect herself from these troubled encounters in two ways. First, she does not walk alone; this is an act of physical buffering. Second, she tells herself that these daytime assaults are not nearly as bad as the late night or early morning attacks. This type of psychological buffering operates to better help Amaya negotiate unavoidable daily travel through her neighborhood.

It is important to consider the popular notion that members of situationally disadvantaged groups should “be smart” and stay away from areas where they are treated badly; if they
don’t, they must be asking for trouble (Gardener 1995, 76). Unfortunately this widely accepted notion does not account for the many people who don’t have the luxury of living, shopping, and working somewhere else. It does not allow for the reality that many members of situationally disadvantaged groups are treated poorly in most places. Amaya’s account reinforces the routine nature of street-based MIAs in this space by showing how women must begin to prioritize when, where, and how to stay safe based on the severity of different kinds of street based MIAs that occur here.

The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates how a teenage girl physically shields her body from the unwanted gaze of an interaction with a male stranger as she waits at a bus stop. It also illustrates how the girl resists a troubled street encounter by removing herself from the immediate site and shielding herself with the company of adults nearby:

A girl who appears to be in her early teens sits on a bus bench with her book bag next to her. She wears a purple T-shirt, blue jeans, and black flip-flops as she is visibly distracted by whatever appears on the screen of her cell phone. I notice her glance up from her phone once or twice in the direction from where the bus usually comes. I stand a few feet from where the girl sits and notice a middle-aged black man with a medium brown complexion and graying hair. He wears a navy blue zip-up sweatshirt, black pants, and matching black shoes. As he walks toward the bus bench where the girl sits, I see him slightly grin through his full beard. The man slows as he approaches the bus stop. The girl quickly looks up as the man’s shadow hovers over where she sits. Seemingly a bit startled, she grabs her book bag and cradles it in her lap. The middle-aged man then sits down on the bench just inches from the girl. I notice the man talking to the girl in a hushed tone
not loud enough for me to hear. As he leans in and continues to talk to her she begins to nervously look around. Still talking, the man moves closer to the girl and stretches his arm out over the back of the bench just inches from her shoulders. The girl looks angrily at the man but remains silent. She promptly stands up, looking away from him, though he turns his head to follow her with his eyes. The young girl walks away from the bench, still holding her book bag in her arms. She steps into the shallow doorway of an abandoned storefront and stands behind a woman, who looks to be in her thirties and is talking on a cell phone, while I stand just a few steps away on her right side.

The young girl described in this encounter demonstrates an act of physical buffering in which she uses her personal belongings as a way to shield herself from an undesired interaction on the street. Upon encountering a middle-aged man at a bus stop she quickly picks up her backpack and holds it in her lap using it to create a physical barrier between herself and a stranger. Eventually the girl stands up and walks away from the bench to find another place to wait for the bus to arrive. In an effort to reclaim a sense of comfort and safety, she places herself between two adult women who are also waiting for the bus; repositioning herself here provides distance from the man on the bench. She then places herself in such a way that she uses the bodies of the two other people present to help shield herself from further interaction with this man. Though the young girl doesn’t leave the site after experiencing a troubled interaction, she uses the space available to buffer herself from an already uncomfortable and potentially threatening encounter. The man has used his dominant status as both male and middle-aged to intimidate a teenaged girl. As I illustrated in the opening to this chapter, in this setting a black woman or
girl alone is vulnerable; she is often an opportunity for another’s predatory behavior.

The next account, by nineteen-year-old Shameeah, explains how she and some of her friends use local businesses as shields from street-based MIAs:

Me and some of my homegirls don’t even deal with all that wild shit the boys around here do. Like, when I’m waiting for the bus over on Fortieth and Main Street it’s this group of guys, like four of ’em, and they want to talk about every girl that walks by. Like, “Oooh girl, when we gon’ fuck?” and it’s, like, I don’t even know you. Why you gotta’ talk crazy to me? For what? So me and my girls, if we see them coming we just go into the liquor store or the Chinese food place or somewhere and wait for the bus in there. They won’t come in there with all that, ’cause if we start fighting in the store the people will call the police.

Shameeah describes a specific way she and her friends use physical buffering as a strategy. Upon seeing a particular group of young men who routinely hang around Fortieth and Main Street—a place she travels through often—she and her friends have begun to use local stores and takeout restaurants as protective barriers against street-based MIAs. This type of buffering reflects what Nikki Jones describes as situational avoidance: the work girls do to avoid potentially threatening situations and social settings (2010, 54). In addition, the girls in this account use the physical presence of store owners and employees to deter these young men from entering and engaging them in face-to-face interactions. According to Shameeah, the threat of the police being called in response to a potentially confrontational interaction inside a store or restaurant seems to keep the young men from following her and her friends. A significant component to Shameeah’s use of local businesses as
a part of shielding herself from these assaults is the requirement to patronize these establishments: store owners yell at people who enter their places of business and hang around for more than a few minutes without buying anything, telling them to get out of their stores. In turn, it is likely that Shameelah and others are expected and often required to make a purchase to be allowed to stay inside the store while waiting for the bus. Being required to pay for this type of shielding in an effort to stay safe is not reasonable; for many women, this is not something they can afford on a daily basis.

Shameelah seems confident in how she and her friends have creatively used local establishments as a resource to stay safe, a practical means to physically buffer themselves from street-based harassment. Yet for some black women living in the inner city this is not a viable option. Not all people, not even paying customers, are allowed to use small businesses as temporary waiting areas. Differences in presentation of self (Goffman 1959) can work for or against some women when they are or are not afforded this resource. There are markers that Shameelah and others present that indicate to some local store owners that she is the kind of person who is acceptable to have wait in their store (Feagin and Sikes 1994, chap. 2). Shameelah protects herself from street-based MIAs, and their accompanying magnification, by using local businesses as a barrier, yet once inside local stores and takeout restaurants her race, class, gender, and social location keep her under a different type of surveillance: the hypersurveillance often performed by store owners and employees upon young black shoppers in urban communities.

What might typically be described as sexual harassment I explicitly conceptualize as a form of gendered violence: a street-based microinteractional assault that follows common patterns of initiation and escalation. Through understanding how such
assaults unfold and the ways distressed local conditions help shape these interactions, much is revealed about the daily lives of women in the inner city. We see how much is at risk for women who experience these routine instances of public harassment from day to day. In this chapter, I have explored how poor black women feel about this threatening and potentially violent feature of their daily lives and shown how they negotiate these types of events while trying to maintain their own personal safety. The narrative accounts presented here illustrate how women occupying public space are vulnerable in societies where gender is constructed in relation to power, making men dominant and women subordinate. With every instance of street harassment women’s inferior status is reinforced and they are routinely reminded of their constant vulnerability to sexual violence and other forms of physical harm (Tuerkheimer 1997, 11–12).

There are physical, emotional, and structural risks and implications to street-based microinteractional assaults. This includes the risk of physical harm and the long-term emotional impact of such violations to one’s person. Structural implications include the reinforcement of gendered subordination of women in instances of public harassment and the simultaneous support of men’s right to largely define these situations (Gardener 1995, chap. 4). In particular, the implications of street harassment experienced by black women reinforces their position as subordinate within the context of hegemonic gender ideology between groups and maintains their marginalized status within black gender ideology. Through experiences of street harassment in the neighborhood, black women experience a very public form of oppression and domination at the hands of black men. Such acts work to preserve the gender hierarchy within their own race and social class groups (Collins 2005, 185–188).

Deirdre Davis suggests that the street becomes a key forum that maintains and reinforces the gender hierarchy through
acts of street harassment (1994, 5). Davis argues that these incidents work to gender the street in four ways. The first is through exclusion, because through these acts of male-to-female harassment the street becomes marked as a male space where women are not equal participants in public life and in turn excluded. The second is through domination, where men establish and control the boundaries that define women’s participation in this space. The third is through invasion, as women’s right to privacy is invaded by this form of public aggression. And the fourth is through oppression, as women’s mobility and range of motion are restricted and they are left with an absence of choices regarding when, where, and how to maneuver through this public space, further perpetuating female subordination (Davis 1994, 5–6).

This chapter has illustrated how women can become targets of verbal, physical, and sexually predatory male behavior in the public space of a poor inner-city community. We see how women’s subordination is constantly being reinforced as they experience oppressive public encounters with men on the street. I have made central how the impact of these events is intensified for poor black women living in socially isolated communities; these women experience street-based MIAs as “regular occasions” (Goffman 1963, 19) that are folded into the rhythm of their daily lives. Poverty and limited local resources help shape the few options women have for avoiding or exiting community spaces where they are regularly exposed to MIAs. Additionally, if settings where expectations that civil law will protect residents are not trusted, this only increases women’s vulnerability to public abuse. Not having reliable forms of protection and support such as civil law and social resources aimed at improving quality of life, poor women in urban settings are likely to remain susceptible to public harassment on the street. It is important to note, however, that because most of these troubled encounters occur on the street in a poor neighborhood regularly exposed to violence, in a safer space women’s
experiences with these kinds of assaults might decrease. I am hopeful that some will escape this environment and much of the tragedy that occurs within it. But I am aware that their status as black women, poor or not, marks them as a raced and gendered other within the larger U.S. social order that continues to open them up to verbal, physical, and sexual assault in a variety of settings.