

Most young Afro-American men from an inner city who were interviewed had established positive ethnic identities but had not realized their personal and career goals.

LOST AND FOUND

Reflections on Identity and Success from Six Black Men

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Dream Deferred

“What happens to a dream deferred?”

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore —

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over —

Like a syrupy sweet?

Or does it explode?

— Langston Hughes (1945, 14)¹

Getting off an interstate highway exit leading to one predominantly black inner-city neighborhood, we could easily see the

AUTHORS' NOTE: *We would like to thank Brenda Hill for her assistance in preparing this article and the participants who made this study possible.*

URBAN EDUCATION, Vol. 26 No. 3, October 1991 310-326
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physical evidences of Langston Hughes's (1945) dream deferred: the old burned and abandoned buildings and homes, the faces of prostitutes walking up and down the streets, the shadowy figure of a pimp whose presence was veiled but real, the drug houses, and often the enactment of petty and even major crimes. Growing up in such a community, a youngster could easily mistake these "adaptation[s] to oppression" for "a culture of choice" rather than "a culture of necessity," placing sole blame for urban blight on fellow blacks and overlooking the integrity of many good neighbors (Hare 1976, 12). Belonging to what might be seen as an "inferior" class, the urban dweller could then become trapped within the lowest level of ethnic identity development wherein self-depreciation is commonplace (Gay 1987).

Some evidence suggests that given the existence of a good support system, the highest level of identity development can be attained. Such an "integrated" person enjoys a high degree of racial pride but is optimistic about his or her future and feels a sense of compassion for all humanity (Gay 1987). Studies focusing on black men suggest that they realize this ideal and create for themselves a meaningful personal and occupational life when they perceive no more than limited racism in important environmental settings; value working; can avoid illicit street life; receive encouragement from peers, parents, or female companions; and have achievement-oriented role models or significant others (Monroe 1987; Monroe and Goldman 1988; Scritchfield and Picou 1982; Hall 1981; Liebow 1980; Johnsen and Medley 1978; Springer and Anderson 1972). *Brothers* (Monroe and Goldman 1988) provides a descriptive account of ten Afro-American men in their mid-thirties who all grew up in the same urban neighborhood, featuring some men who have developed a strong ethnic identity and stable family life, while achieving educational and economic goals of middle-class stature. Thirty-five-year-old Ray Stingley is one example. He married young and eventually he and his wife had three children. Although Stingley struggled financially and personally to obtain a college education and success as a salesman in a major corporation, encouragement by his parents and his own supportive nuclear family sustained him. He maintains that perhaps he could have climbed

faster and farther had he been white, but "he wouldn't trade places with anyone" (Monroe and Goldman 1988, 86).

Conversely, when black men perceive success as a rejection of their Afro-American culture, they often feel forced to choose between the two in order to develop a positive ethnic identity. Hunt (1977) notes that black youngsters who attend integrated schools often receive higher grades; have higher rates of high school graduation, college attendance, and occupational achievement; and display a high degree of efficacy when compared to their counterparts in segregated settings. Yet many black students in integrated schools pay a price for their educational and financial success, manifesting a lower self-esteem than those in segregated or separate schools. Fordham's (1988) study of exceptional black students offers further insight into this dilemma. Fordham's male participants, in particular, but also the females are internally conflicted over having adopted a "raceless" identity to achieve academic success. Complementing Fordham's observations, a number of black participants in other studies choose to strive for a high self-concept or feelings of efficacy, in lieu of striving for success in the dominant (white Anglo) society (Thomas 1979; Springer and Anderson 1972).

SIX MEN

Due to the variation in the literature and to Robert Staples's admonition that not all black men "respond uniformly to the same condition" (1978, 171), we conducted a phenomenological study of six black men, an appropriate number for such an investigation (Tesch 1987, 1988). In so doing we traced their evolving identities, beginning in adolescence and extending into their early years of manhood, paying attention to the interaction between those self-perceptions and their changing personal and occupational goals.

All in their mid-twenties, Bill, Charlie, David, Greg, Mike, and Glen had grown up in the community initially described in this article, and each was in the process of redefining himself personally and occupationally. Interviewing each one for at least two hours, we recorded his life history, focusing on his self-reflections and

future plans and how these had changed since early adolescence. We listened to the tapes several times, and then both of us made tables for each participant, listing important thematic categories that had emerged from his account. We also recorded information such as age, marital status, parents' marital status, number of siblings, religious preference, level of education, and type of current employment.

Creating the cultural context of our participants' recollections and reflections we obtained information from city officials about the men's high schools and communities. Each had attended the same integrated high school located within a predominantly black community. The racial and ethnic composition of their high school had been 48.6 percent black and 42.5 percent white (Anglo) students. The remainder of youngsters were of Oriental, American Indian, or Spanish descent. The participants' neighborhood had been and was still nestled within the inner city of a metropolitan area, composed of approximately 600,000 people. It had produced many characteristics of a climate in which youthful dreams of success might easily be discouraged: one of the highest crime rates per capita in the nation and one of the highest percentages of teenage pregnancies. For years, however, it had supported a thriving black newspaper that reported upbeat stories about the city's Afro-American population and generated concern about pressing social problems. Moreover, numerous churches had strived to address social concerns by donating members' time and money to needy parishioners and other more global causes, such as ending world hunger and the abuse of human rights.

Each of the participants came from homes in which at least one parent was highly supportive, and which were still part of the same black community in which the men had been reared. These had been families with two to ten children. Charlie and Greg were the only two participants who had grown up in homes headed by both of their biological parents, but shortly after divorcing Mike's father, Mike's mother remarried a man who in some respects fulfilled a fatherly role in Mike's life. Some of the parents had not graduated from high school, and only Charlie's mother and father had obtained college degrees. In each two-parent household both parents

had worked outside the home, as did each of the three mothers who headed the single parent homes. Early in their children's lives, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, most of these parents had held jobs typically reserved for Afro-Americans in a segregated society. For example, Charlie's mother had worked as a maid, and Greg's father had been a janitor. But as the 1970s wore on, gradually some of the parents of our participants were able to take advantage of new employment opportunities and nondiscriminatory business loans made possible by the national civil rights movement that had begun years earlier. Bill's mother became a regional manager for a national food chain, and Charlie's father earned a bachelor's degree and became an accountant. Mike's father, who had been a mechanic, became an independent businessman. David's mother became an electrical engineer.

Despite these achievements, the worn-out school buildings and dilapidated surroundings that were commonplace fixtures of the respondents' world seemed to them at times to be the harbingers of their eventual defeat. Reacting to their fear of becoming like some of the older black men in their community whose dreams had been deferred, as youths they had fantasized not about practical but about glamorous careers. For five of the six men, this meant a career as a professional athlete.

BILL

Like the lads in Paul Willis's (1977) study of working-class boys in Manchester, England, as a teenager Bill had overcompensated for his fear of failure by pursuing what he thought were ultramanly activities. Adopting an exaggerated sense of his own masculinity, Bill had identified academics as an effete endeavor, choosing instead to spend much of his time "riding with the partners," "chasing women," fighting, taking drugs, and ironically, playing sports, as well. Bill had planned to play football in college and then move into a professional league (Willis 1977; Gaston 1986). He explained why.

The role models I took were from TV . . . or hearing about them. . . . Nobody never set me down and said, Bill, this is this and that. But

[I sensed that] . . . my father always wanted me to have a lot more than he had had. He had quit school in the sixth grade to take care of his family after his parents died.

Moreover, he continued,

In school, some kids could draw real good. I couldn't draw worth a damn. Some kids made . . . straight As. Shit, I passed. But when I stepped on to a football field, that was my area. And I knew I could take control. And there wasn't nothing that I . . . couldn't do. "You are going pro . . .," everybody said . . . and my dream . . . was to come back and see my old fellows and friends and . . . the little kids could say, "That's so-and-so. He played for such and such," . . . Just to bring . . . that title back [was everything to me].

Bill graduated from high school and, as a college freshman, began playing football. Yet he was still unhappy, because his success had not emanated from a positive ethnic identity but from a sense of racial inferiority. "The fright of failure," to distinguish himself from other Afro-Americans who, Bill believed, were waiting to see him fail, was his greatest motivation to be "somebody."

The black community is like a bucket of crap. Every time one gets to the top [the others] . . . get jealous and try to pull him down. And I think that's one of the strongest holds that our black people and our black community have. Instead of working together to build, we work against to tear up.

To escape his inner turmoil, Bill used drugs while he was in college. Then, one fateful day he was badly hurt playing football and was forced to quit the game forever. Resembling other men in similar situations, Bill believed he had failed completely, and he quit college (Collison 1987). Since his injury, Bill had been embittered and confused:

I'm not one to ever be satisfied. . . . I do odd things. Sometimes I say things or hurt someone. . . . I say things that hurt myself. . . . I go out and do something for the moment and to get some quick relief. Sometimes I . . . spend money. I go shopping. . . . If I have one Mercedes I want four. [I know] . . . that's being not able to cope with reality. . . . If I had ten Rolls Royces it doesn't really mean anything.

Another disappointment for Bill occurred when his father died not long after his son had dropped out of college. A former cotton

farmer from Mississippi, the older man had quit school in the sixth grade to help support his family. Bill and his father had not been close, and in Bill's mind the older man died with the unrealized vision that Bill would "have a lot more than he had."

Thus Bill refused to watch others play the game he loved, moved out of his black community, bought a car with tinted glass that shielded him from the outside world, and married a woman who did not "mind whispering in your ear and letting you stand out front." Speaking specifically about his lost career as a professional athlete and his personal strife, Bill confessed, "I don't think probably I'll ever come to grips with it, . . . [but if] I do finally know I'll be a better person."

Regrettably, Bill has been a victim of "the negative aspect of popular culture and organized sports, . . . major contributors to the destruction of the current generation of Black males" (Gaston 1986, 371). Yet he has not given up the struggle to believe in his race and in himself. He told us that he wanted to be the kind of man his future children could respect and model. He has considered returning to college and also made some investments with the insurance money that he collected as a result of his football injury. As if to bolster himself he told us:

The white community . . . fears . . . the black race, because the black race is so dominant. . . . If [we] get an education it's . . . even harder for them to deal with [us]. . . . A black person who's smart and intelligent and has an education . . . probably [poses] the most danger to a white person.

CHARLIE

Like Bill, Charlie had grown up amid the same depressing sites. As he stated, "Lots of [black] people really ain't doing too much of nothing. They just kind of sit back and take whatever life will give them. . . . They're just . . . thinking about where they can stay today. They're just living day to day." But Charlie did not place the blame solely on those whose dreams had been deferred. Rather he believed that many Afro-Americans had been cheated in school, never really given the opportunity to hope for self-esteem and job satisfaction. He explained:

Any blacks that are anywhere right now in positions [of authority] . . . who came out of DuBois High School . . . never came back to the school and talked [to us]. . . . They never did come and try to be role models, [because] . . . they were so into what they were doing. And I hope I'm not like that.

Consequently, like Bill, as an adolescent Charlie had dreamed of emulating media heroes, such as athletes. Although Charlie had graduated from high school, the stiff competition to obtain a spot on a college basketball team forced him to seek an alternative occupation. He obtained a part-time job and went to college hoping to become a high school coach instead. Because he recognized the absence of effective high school counseling and programs that introduced a number of occupational options for black males, as a coach he hoped to encourage youngsters to enjoy sports but to plan for more than one job.

Eventually, Charlie decided against coaching because his mother, interested in seeing her son take advantage of opportunities not long offered to Afro-Americans, convinced him that there was little money in teaching grade or high school athletics. Charlie acquiesced to his mother's will, but he planned to marry a "humble Christian" woman whose major interest was "making him happy" and to coach their children's Little League teams. At the time of our interview, he was pursuing an engineering degree, but his failure to take courses in high school that would have prepared him for the academic demands of higher education and probably his own lack of interest in engineering had made Charlie's goal difficult to achieve. Yet he was hopeful about his future as an engineer, a goal that he did not perceive as deriving solely from white culture. While Charlie was growing up, he had watched his father return to school and study to become an accountant, giving Charlie the basis for perceiving his goals in concert with his emergent ethnic identity.

DAVID

David spoke wistfully of his adolescent days when he, too, had dreamed of an athletic career and spent much of his time "chasing women" and "being cool." Yet he confessed that even though he "always fantasized about playing pro basketball," eventually he

found that he did not "have what it takes." Although he had gone on to earn a high school diploma, without a chance for an athletic scholarship he had not attended college and, for a time, had worked only sporadically. Just a few months before we spoke to him, David had obtained full-time employment and realized that his youthful desire to be a "macho" man had almost ruined his life (Wallace 1978). "I was just hanging out there. There wasn't really nothing [else beside athletics] that I had planned," he remembered about the many weeks that had evolved into the six years that had followed his senior year in high school.

Ultimately, his parents' influence convinced him to work again. Although they had been divorced most of David's life, while growing up he had been close to both of them. Of his own father he said, "If I need something, and if he's got it, I've got it." Of his mother, David affirmed, "She's my best friend."

Beth, the woman with whom David lived, was also a major stimulus for his personal growth and renewed occupational efforts. With her, he planned to obtain a loan and take courses in heating and air-conditioning installation and repair. Someday "I'd like to have my own little old heating and air set up." Until then, David explained that he could not marry Beth, because he was not yet the man he hoped to be. He was psychologically if not physically addicted to drugs, and as a day laborer, in some respects he believed that he was "just living day to day." Thus he has counseled Beth to remain in his shadow and not go on to college until he could realize his dreams. Thus far she has done as he wishes. "I can do one thing for her and she'll do a thousand for me, and I don't have to hear no flack about 'well I did this and this for you and you only did that,' . . . That's the kind of woman I want and that's the kind of woman I got."

Perhaps if David makes more progress toward obtaining his own business, then he will be more supportive of Beth's individualism. One of David's most important strengths is his ethnic pride. He perceived no conflict between his race and his goal to be a self-employed family man. And he did not believe that prejudice would prevent him from, one day, owning and operating a heating and

air-conditioning shop. Although his prospective clients might be black or white, he did not feel that he must move from his black community to be successful. As far as he was concerned, he "was home."

GREG

Greg's life course had been very much like David's. Greg's plans to play college football ended when, lured by drugs and a lack of commitment to school, he dropped out of high school during his senior year. "I've been smoking weed for ten years, . . . and I know drugs have really hindered me," he acknowledged. Yet he had decided that his former perception of himself as a "cool" tough guy was only a self-destructive myth.

Greg had a vivid memory of the day that he had decided to change his life. Ironically, television, the bearer of so many negative messages, was the medium for Greg's awakening. Unemployed and living with his mother and father, one lazy day he had sat watching television and smoking marijuana. After viewing an antidrug commercial about an unemployed young man who was still living at home and making excuses for wasting time, Greg remarked, "It tripped me out," because he knew that he was looking in a mirror. "Since then I'm tired of just being satisfied." As a result he has begun to set new goals for himself. He was working full time as a janitor; planned to begin training for a more technical, higher-paying job; and hoped, one day, to be a loyal husband and father.

As in David's case, Corine, the woman with whom Greg lived, and his parents were central reasons for his decision to redefine himself and prepare for a more stable life. "Most of all, I . . . want my parents to be proud. . . . I couldn't give them nothing to be able to repay them, but I'd like to give them something, . . . a new house . . . in the country just to themselves. . . . I would like for them to be somewhere where it's peaceful." And although he, too, hoped to live outside the inner city, it was not to escape other Afro-Americans, but only to live in a safe part of town. He assured us, "It ain't just blacks who have a hard time coping with life."

Although Greg had resolved to be a dependable provider and family man, he had yet to finish high school, while Corine's self-concept and career ambitions seemed to be well established. She already had a college degree and was employed as a medical technician. Yet Greg planned to catch up with and even be able to provide for her. "If my wife have to stop working I would want to be able to foot . . . everything . . . , because I want a family, and I want to be able to take care of a family — [to be its] backbone." Greg could begin to compare himself to her and become frustrated. He did note that "she could be more understanding at times." But Greg's strength was his Afro-American pride and support, instilled in him by loving parents. With this in his favor, he was beginning to expect a better life and to teach himself how to attain it, but his future was very tentative.

MIKE

Conversely, Mike had made much the greatest strides toward a positive ethnic identity and fulfilling his image of being a personally and professionally successful man. As a child he had been self-conscious about his appearance and generally angry at the world. Remembering his limited childhood experiences and lack of male role models, he recalled his Boy Scout days, spent in a poor part of town. "We had a female Cub Scout leader who never took us camping or anywhere else. We went in her back yard one day and played, and that was the extent of our adventures," he recalled.

As a youth Mike longed to escape the city and see the world by playing college athletics. But that dream died when he got expelled his senior year of high school for fighting. In fact, he spent much of his adolescence engaged in delinquent activities. When we spoke to him, Mike expressed heartfelt regret that his mother "didn't ever get to do what she wanted to do . . . Because . . . one of us [Mike or his brothers] was in jail and she had to take [her extra] . . . money and get us out."

Spurred in part by a dedication to make amends, Mike had learned to channel his anger, and by the time of our interview, he had become a self-respecting responsible man. The unconditional love of his mother seemed to have planted in him the seeds for this

change. No longer was he ashamed, angry, and defensive. He had earned a high school diploma; gotten a relatively high-paying factory job; and, with his stepfather, purchased a used car business. The new Mike dealt comfortably with black and white customers, and his resentment of authority figures had dissipated. Although as a child Mike had not been close to his stepfather, remembering that he had "just watched T.V. all day," as adults, they had found renewed hope for their careers and gone into business together. Their policy was to finance many of their customers who could not afford to pay cash. They knew that this was not a "quick" way to make money, but, Mike explained, eventually it paid off. Soon, Mike intended to enroll in college business and accounting courses that would prepare him to manage the future investments he intended to make.

Mike refused to believe that being a good businessman meant striving for a white man's ideal. Rather, he maintained that being an honorable entrepreneur benefited him, his future family, and his community.

I'm . . . religious. I believe in God. . . . I believe that . . . if I keep on doing what I've been doing and try to do right . . . then I'll do all right. . . . Sometimes I think that I could jump out there and sell some 'caine real quick for about a year then I'd be on top of things [financially]. . . . [But] that ain't right.

Mike spoke well of Jessica, the woman whom he was dating and intended to marry. He envisioned their relationship as one of two equal, hardworking people, neither one of whom was openly or discretely subservient to the other.² Jessica was a teacher who held a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and a master's in computer science. Eventually she hoped to open her own day-care center. Mike described her as "a good woman . . . [with] a brain. I probably could have gotten a prettier, lighter woman. . . . I always liked lighter, prettier girls. . . . But she's nice looking, and . . . she wants something out of life. . . . I ain't never wanted to take care of no woman."

That Mike still linked the conception of pretty with lighter-colored skin hinted that a part of that self-conscious black boy still dwelled within him. Yet he was evolving from the youngster who

may have perceived segregation and its inequitable opportunities as what he deserved, into a self-actualized Afro-American man with what he viewed as a quality life.

GLEN

Differing from the other participants, early in his life Glen had spurned the adolescent macho model. Never had he engaged in delinquent behavior, nor had he hoped to be an athlete. Instead, from the time he was a little boy he had resolved to be a monogamous, family man, because when

I was . . . about six years old. . . . [I remember] my mother in there [the kitchen] peeling potatoes . . . and she looked at me . . . and she said, "Don't ever be like your daddy." And I looked up at her [crying] and said, "I won't. I won't. I won't." I knew what she meant, even at a young age, . . . that if I ever had a family, the importance of family and closeness [should be everything].

To this day, one of Glen's "main concerns . . . is to take care . . . of my mother. I won't be satisfied until my mother is in a house . . . [that's] paid for. And then . . . I'll be content and . . . do what I've got to do."

Probably because of the respect Glen had for his mother, he intended to marry and establish what might be called a feminist relationship with his wife.

I'm not a chauvinist. If my wife made more [money] than me I'm happy for her [because that means] we're both making money. It ain't her money. It's our money . . . I want a woman that's strong. . . . I don't want my wife standing behind me. I want her standing on the side of me. . . . If I fall down . . . I want her to be able to reach her arms out and catch me and hold me and help me get back on my feet. If I can't get back on my feet . . . then she knows what to do. . . . She knows how to run the money . . . I don't want nobody just sitting and looking pretty.

Regardless of his regard for strong black women, Glen did not express negative attitudes toward black men himself. In fact, as an adult, he claimed to understand his father's frustration over being an illiterate black man faced with family and job responsibilities that he could not meet.

My father . . . was never intimate [with] or close to us. It was always my mother. . . . He led a different way . . . always out in the streets . . . everywhere. . . . [But] he didn't know no better. [When he was a kid] Christmas came . . . he didn't get a present when he was young so . . . he didn't believe in Christmas. . . . The only thing I remember my father ever doing . . . [for me] was that he bought me a bike, a god damn green bike. It wasn't a ten speed. It was a Schwinn. I thought I was the shit. . . . Niggers running around . . . hugging on it, [and I said,] "Get the fuck over I've got a Schwinn." I wish he would have saw what was going to happen in the future . . . [that] he was going to regret it. Even at a young age I knew that through time . . . when we [his brothers and sisters] became a certain age he was going to try to come back and do the things he should have done, but we were going to be leading our own lives.

So at eighteen Glen had gone to college instead of joining the military, because an uncle had offered to pay for it. Lacking direction and commitment he had dropped out. But when we spoke with him he was working forty hours a week in his aunt's restaurant, and he had returned to school. Glen seemed determined to earn a bachelor's degree, a prize held by only one other person in his extended family.

After graduating, Glen hoped to become self-employed, but he intended always to live in his black community and to represent it as a U.S. Congressman. Not only did he want to be a man on whom his family could count but someone who could speak for and help unite his Afro-American neighbors. Having lived and worked with and for many whites, Glen knew that he would have to speak two different languages and live in two different worlds to accomplish his goals. He even noted that he could speak standard English, but because he felt so relaxed in our conversations, he had spoken black English, the lexicon of his heart. He therefore did not believe that wanting to be a family man, businessman, and Congressman meant emulating white, not black, ideals. "White people didn't necessarily invent [this goal.] Maybe they stole it from some other culture. They stole us, didn't they?"

Confident and proud of his own racial heritage and of the potential among his fellow citizens, Glen had made great strides in

his life toward developing a strong ethnic identity, and as a public servant he hoped to help empower others. Afro-Americans want

someone to brag on because they don't have any . . . heroes. . . . They are tired of people looking at them as lazy shiftless, don't want to do nothing. . . . I believe that if everybody starts to take a position somewhere, then the black community would start to rise. Then watch out god damn it, watch out. . . . What we need to do is all get together [and] help each other . . . as a unit . . . [rid ourselves of] black on black crime, . . . light-skinned blacks who don't like dark-skinned blacks, . . . educated blacks against uneducated blacks, . . . [blacks trying to prove to] white society . . . that [they're] . . . not like the other ones.

We owe that to ourselves, Glen concluded.

YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

Growing to manhood in a segregated community that touted many unrealistic or negative role models, as adolescents, all of our participants had been sorely tested. Yet resembling other Afro-American men in previously mentioned studies, Charlie, David, Greg, Mike, and Glen were nurtured by the love of family members, women friends, and religious faith. In turn, at least Charlie, David, Mike, and Glen had made varying steps to overcome negative self-images characteristic of minorities lodged within the first stage of ethnic identity development. And, with the possible exception of Bill, each participant's conception of Afro-American manhood had evolved from being an ultramacho man to being a dependable family man with a legitimate, fulfilling job. In so resolving, each had aspired to live the life of an unsung decent person who strove, almost silently, amid the tumult of media heroes, drug dealers, and other street people who seemed readily to obtain wealth and self-satisfaction. It's the "quick" — but illegitimately made — "money," confessed Mike and Bill, "that is hardest to turn down."

Thus the participants still had much to overcome. All of their desires to be dedicated family men were unrealized, as were most of their occupational choices. Bill was waiting for his investments to reap rewards; Charlie and Mike were working but were still in

college; and David and Greg (who had not graduated from high school) were day laborers. Mike had made the most progress toward both a positive identity and satisfying gainful employment. Although he was working full time at a local factory, he and his stepfather had purchased and were running their own business, and it was beginning to make money. Yet all around Mike and his former schoolmates, the evidence of many lost dreams lay carved in the faces of older men. They were ever-present reminders that self-confidence must be the participants' persistent ally, if they were to attain their financial and familial goals.

NOTE

1. From the *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Reprinted by permission from Alfred A. Knopf Publishers.
2. For parallels see Cazenave (1983) and Stack (1986).

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