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LINDA – Fieldnotes – Wednesday, October 24, 2007

Subject: Conversation with Veronica Holly
Location: Gordon Campus, Theresa Hotel; 8th Floor
Time: 1:03 – 2:38

[I spoke with Veronica Holly today for over an hour. Contrary to our previous conversations she was extremely helpful, although we took some time to warm up. I did not ask her to tape, since it did not seem quite appropriate, although I wish I had. What is really interesting is this seems to be a conversation about how to be a middle-class person in Harlem, in terms of your responsibilities and in terms of how you are seen.]

ZRP

I rode up the elevator with a motley crew of people, including a man dressed in a suit and tie and a woman dressed flamboyantly in purple and red (can't remember what color the stole was). I was the first to get off the elevator, although somebody climbed in on one of the other levels. I realized that I should check out if the Theresa Hotel houses social services agencies. [Later Veronica would tell me to do just that.]

She began by asking what our goals were and who we wanted to talk with, questions she had asked earlier. We had gone into race in our last conversation, so I began there, saying we would mostly work with African Americans, people with roots in the Caribbean and in West Africa, and Latinos. A bit impatiently, she asked me, beyond these demographics, what types was I interested in. I didn't know where she was going so I asked her what she had in mind. She said she didn't want to make suggestions to pull me off of my interest.

I told her some of my current interests are political education, community building, how institutions and people learn to interact with one another. This did not satisfy her, and she said I needed to identify some **factions**, some **segments of the populations**, like if I want to meet with educators.

I explained that we were trying to cover a broad swath of people, so we wanted to talk to them all. I tell her that it's useful to hear her categories, when in our last conversation she said, school-based, church-based, CBO-based.

She warned that if we start talking to people we "need to step back and look at the **terrain**," learn "how to identify these segments." She took the Theresa Hotel as a point of departure: there's the history of the Theresa Hotel, and there's the contemporary, which is a social services building. "People in the community go to receive various kinds of social services." She tells me to seek out the larger institutions and venues to see what types of services are provided. There are educators in the building, she told me,
Foster care
Child care
Housing

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Job placement
 Re-entry services
 College, not just TC also Touro

Some buildings are like this [implication that I need to find more of them], trying to figure out what the services are, the **goods and services**. She says, referring to the Hotel Theresa, "There's this building," and then gesturing towards the State Building, says, "Then you go across the street to that other building," which is "mostly state offices," with "state elected officials." She tells me that "their conversations, concerns, priorities" are different, more "regulatory." She says of the social services, "this is more **outreach**, and **needs**. They are regulatory."

She refers to our previous conversation about talking with funders to find out what they think they are funding. "But then you'd have to find some key funders," she tells me.

"Because of your experience at In the Spirit of the Children," she tells me, "you lose so much—you lose *so much*" when you don't have a context for hearing what people say. [Original conversation at Supplementary Ed Study Group meetings, Veronica was very positive and reassuring—seems that since then she has taken seriously my concerns.]

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She then talks about outsiders. She says she doesn't mean just race, and I jump in and say I know I'm an outsider in every way. She says at the same time, "I'm an outsider in so many ways, because I'm not in that system." She says when people who are outsiders of that system and looking at people "living in this **ecological** system," they can miss thinking of the people here as **agents**. She says maybe they don't think of their situations in the sophisticated ways we do, but "these cats are processing" their lives. She talks about how they keep all the institutions in mind as they speak with me. She refers to Pamela Jones, the executive director of In the Spirit of the Children, who knows people are "bringing a lot to the table," and that "a lot of it is holding them down." [At this moment Veronica is definitely treating me as somebody who thinks of people as helpless/victimized/less than.]

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Veronica says that I should get to know the services and goods provided in the area. She lists the Ford Foundation providing job training, the state providing housing, [apparently implying that I need to know what is available to help people so I can offer it on tap]. She tells me people will be thinking of me, "What does she know, has she tapped into any of these things" for their benefit.

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She talks about **exchange**, about connecting people with resources especially from Teachers College and Columbia. These include events that are going on, space, small resources such as photocopying. She says she and her sister have had these conversations. They live in Harlem, they want to live around people who look like her, but they don't live "**close**." She says they grew up middle class.

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She goes back to saying that I need a "blueprint" of "what the terrain looks like." She says, "let the people guide you." [This is, of course, what we want, and we're asking for

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know that there's a *hell* of a lot of resources at Columbia." She says, "maybe their uncle works here, or their cousin plays basketball," or somebody attends Saturday Academy, so they see the resources. "You gotta remember that people see," she says. "Harlem talks." She says that there are universities, and I interrupt, guessing what she's going to say, with "NYU." She says she's thinking of Syracuse, where she went to undergrad, and Duke, and few other universities, surrounded by poor communities. She says "the people know you have **resources**."

I say that I don't know resources I have to offer people, and she says, "I'm gonna push you on that." She says, "Say you've met my brother, you're not gonna walk out of the office without giving him something. "She tells me that next week she has some volunteers [can't remember for what]. She adds that there are also other resources, and I ask, like photocopying, and she emphasizes space. "That's the biggest thing with this community." [lack of meeting space?]

She reiterates that I need access, that I need to change my protocol and delivery, and to engage in exchange. She tells me to stay with email or stay with the phone. She then says I need more introductions to people. She starts listing some RAs that work with IUME, such as Karami Johnson, who is a grad assistant who works with schools. Also Steven Fleith, a program assistant. And Brenda Mejia, who has worked with schools affiliated with churches. These are all TC people. She suggests that I start with TC people, and branch out from TC people. She tells me, "I can give you a couple of names of folks."

She thinks of people who work on email, since she "want(s) to do the people on email." She mentions Ade Williams at the Apollo. Ronnie Holly, her brother at the Beacon Center. Shadia Alvarez, who works mostly in the Bronx but also in Harlem. She runs a nonprofit, does race relations. Christina Palmer, who does a parents' group. [I brighten with this.] Karen Ori, who does a block association. I tell her we haven't figured out how to get in touch with block associations, and she says that this is an atypical block association. She is on the board. They do a lot of "SE," and when I ask, she says "SE" is supplemental education. They provide a lot of programming, in contrast to groups like the Harlem Little League, which is just baseball, or dance schools, which are just dance. She says that there are block associations that do political advocacy, and this one does programming, it's "**old-school**." She says, "They do a lot of good stuff, SE stuff."

She tells me to email her with the list of these names. She tells me these are just the leaders, and that maybe I want to organize a focus group behind these groups with their people, that is, the people they serve, specifically parents. She says I should press Ed Gordon and Herve for more funding, and provide food at the Gordon campus. "We can do that here," she says. She suggests hosting a day "where all the groups" come to the Gordon campus, "to schedule a day" for them to come all at once or "staggered," and that we should videotape it. She suggests that that "young man" should help, meaning Eckson. I ask if people will be comfortable with being videotaped, and she says yes.

I ask if this will be an imposition, saying that I can go visit people where they do their work. She says that I can go visit Ade Williams at the Apollo, but Shadia doesn't have

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room to meet. The parents' group doesn't have space. The block association is "virtual," mostly through the telephone, so they would also appreciate space to meet. Veronica says that she can also help to set up some sort of parents' group, or CBO meeting. I ask if that will be useful to her, and she says no. [at this point I am impressed with how much she seems to want to help; of course these are her friends leading the CBOs, so it would help her in terms of their relationships]

She tells me that next Monday Shadia's group is meeting at the Theresa. I ask if I can come. I tell her I can first visit these groups, and she says to ask them, what would you like to see on the agenda (of a CBO meeting).

She tells me that we can see Ronnie any day, since he works everyday. He's "truly my inspiration," she says. The Beacon center is "what schools should be trying to do," what everything she reads says schools are supposed to do. His center is also "everything the Beacon model is supposed to be," and he is constantly hosting people to show what schools and Beacon centers can do. She tells me that parents feel safe there, children feel safe there, and that parents and children get services there. She says, "I hope you can capture it," meaning "the warmth that is in that school." She says that there's a huge Dominican community, there are gangs in the area, and there is also an Ecuadorian community and a Mexican community. She tells me that people hear about it, that Russian Jews from Brooklyn come in to their citizenship classes. "You feel that the school loves the community," she says.