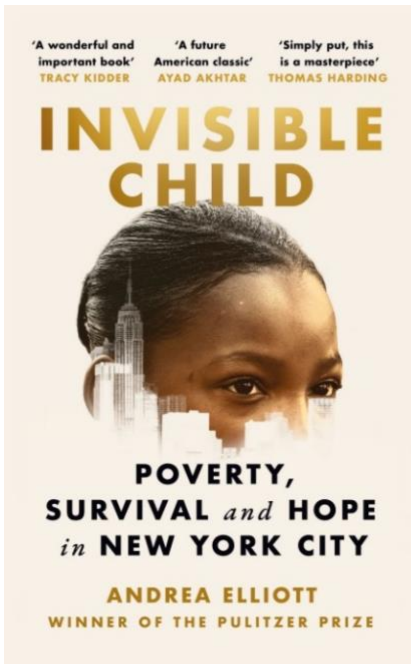
INVISIBLE CHILD: POVERTY, SURVIVAL AND HOPE IN NEW YORK CITY

Stephen McCloskey

Elliott, Andrea (2022) *Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival and Hope in New York City*, London: Penguin Books.



Here is a remarkable study of poverty in the wealthiest country in the world that leaves an indelible imprint seared by a compelling narrative, made more so by the horror of it being non-fiction. This is a social polemic categorised as 'narrative non-fiction', a factual account written in the form of a fictional story. It has the propulsive pacing of a good novel but is firmly framed in the non-fictional world of the homeless and marginalised in one of world's most unequal cities, New York. It takes us on an eight-year journey in the life of Dasani Coates, an African-American child who is eleven years old when we meet her living in a homeless shelter in Brooklyn called Auburn, a ten story brick building built on the site of an old hospital. The book is a study in immersion in which the author-as-researcher becomes a fly on the wall witness of Dasani and her family's struggle to survive and stay together as they negotiate the homeless system in America. The author, a journalist with the *New York Times*, initially planned a series of articles about poverty and homelessness among young people which drew her to Dasani and her family.

These articles were indeed published but developed into the larger narrative of *Invisible Child* amid growing social unrest and mobilisation in the United States (US) manifested through Occupied Wall Street and other social movements following the 2008 financial crisis.

Invisible Child is in many respects a work about neoliberalism though I'm not sure the term is ever used in the book. For example, Dasani is named after a bottled water from the Coca-Cola stable which was withdrawn from the UK market for excess levels of Bromate, 'a substance linked with an increased cancer risk' (Wright, 2004). Her younger sister, Avianna, is named after the more expensive *Evian* water (Elliott, 2022: 18) and their mother was named for that sweet French fragrance *Chanel*. As Chanel later recognises, 'Even the names of her daughters bowed to a white material world' (Ibid: 125).

Invisible Child contrasts the gentrification of New York and the growth of luxury high tower accommodation with the withdrawal of welfare supports from impoverished families that might induce 'dependence' on the state. Dasani is one of 22,000 homeless children in New York in 2012 when the story begins and, by 2016, this figure has climbed to 100,000 (Ibid: 39). Across America by January 2020, there were 580,466 experiencing homelessness including 34,210 unaccompanied minors and 171,575 children like Dasani living in families (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021). Sixteen million children in the US grow up poor and 47 million Americans are on food stamps (Elliott, 2022: 40). The question looming over the book, posed with barely controlled anger, is how a country with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of $63,593.44 (World Bank, 2022) can subject so many of its citizens, most of them African Americans, to such an appalling existence. The real strength of the book is that it attempts an answer to this question by using Dasani's personal narrative to highlight systemic failings and racism rooted in slavery and the Jim Crow laws created in the 1830s to enforce racial segregation. We have seen through the murder of George Floyd and so many other African Americans over the past decade, often at the hands of law enforcement, how unresolved these issues remain (BBC, 2021).

A day in the life of Dasani

Dasani shares a single room in Auburn with her parents, Chanel and Supreme, and her seven siblings. Their building has been cited 13 times by city inspectors for lead paint, mould, roaches and vermin. The family sleep on mattresses on the floor without dignity and privacy with fellow residents including addicts, prostitutes and severe mental health cases. For a child moving from the family room to a common kitchen area to heat a bottle in a microwave means the possibility of running a gauntlet of threats and behavioural problems. Dasani is the first to rise and checks immediately on the heaving bodies of her siblings. She is what one of her teachers describes as the 'typical parentified child' who 'will put the mask on everyone else and the oxygen runs out' (Elliott, 2022: 167). The long line for breakfast in the communal area will often mean skipping a meal to escort her younger brothers and sisters to school or a bus. Despite the stress of living with poverty and regularly observing traumatic family arguments and crises, Dasani exhibits an '"intuitive" approach to learning' (Ibid: 25) with her heroic principal and teacher acutely aware of the load she is carrying. Dasani's family lives on $65 a day which amounts to $6.50 per person when their benefits are totalled and divided by the eight children and two adults. So much for welfare scroungers and benefit cheats milking the system; a myth advanced by Republican and Democrat politicians and presidents alike for political ends.

In the Fort Greene area where Dasani's 'family residence' is located, the top five per cent of residents earn 76 times the income of the bottom quintile (Ibid: 155). The mayor of New York from 2002-13, the publishing billionaire Michael Bloomberg, 'broke ground' on 19 luxury buildings in Fort Greene in a period of three years using 'aggressive re-zoning and generous subsidies', increasing white residents by 80 per cent (Ibid: 155-56). Bloomberg's administration also launched a string of success academy schools which will displace public schools like McKinney's Secondary School of the Arts attended by Dasani. Bloomberg closes 137 public schools while opening 174 charter schools (Ibid: 59). Places at success academies are 'determined by a random lottery' which reduces education to the luck of the draw rather than a state-provided human right (Success academy, 2022). While the academies

claim to 'prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in all that we do' (Ibid), New York's school system remains 'among the most segregated' (Elliott, 2022: 14).

Bloomberg comes to personify a contemporary form of Mark Twain's satirical gilded age of greed and corruption (Twain and Dudley Warner, 2001 [1873]). The number of homeless families increases by 80 per cent during his administration (Elliott, 2022: 62) and '[a]lmost half of New York's 8.3 million residents are living near or below the poverty line' (Ibid: 5) with 250,000 New Yorkers on the public housing waiting list (Ibid: 12). The reader is unsurprised to learn that in 2012, New York is the most unequal of the ten largest cities in America (Ibid: 533).

Historical antecedents

The author traces the earliest ancestral roots of Dasani's family back to a slave called David in 1835 under the ownership of a slaver of English background called Sykes based in North Carolina. Her great grandfather, Wesley Junior 'June' Sykes, fought as part of an all-Black division in the Second World War. June Sykes joined the great migration of six million African Americans from rural areas of the Southern states to urban centres in the North and West between 1910 and 1970 (Ibid: 84). These newly arriving migrants soon found themselves marginalised and largely segregated, denied access to home ownership, the 'key to accruing wealth' (Ibid: 86). 'The exclusion of African Americans from real estate – not to mention college, white-collar jobs and the ability to vote – laid the foundation of a lasting poverty that Dasani would inherit' (Ibid: 86). By 1975, Black families represented 44 per cent of the eleven million Americans on welfare and yet represented 10 per cent of the nation's population (Ibid: 184). The 'welfare queen' became a political stick used by Democrats and Republicans alike to reduce welfare spending (Ibid). The political priority was to move people off welfare with time limited cash support as a 'culture of deterrence' took effect (Ibid: 185). For decades, the New York authorities had helped homeless families jump the waiting list which resulted in only a small number returning to homeless shelters. But Bloomberg believed this practice incentivised families to enter shelters in the

first place and so stopped prioritising the homeless on housing lists (Ibid: 116). Dasani's family, like so many other inner city African American families in the 1980s, suffered terribly from the crack epidemic that claimed lives, increased crime and scarred communities. Dasani's parents and grandparents wrestle with addiction and we find poverty, homelessness, addiction, AIDS and separation regularly intersecting in her story. But the author is clear that the social disadvantages and racism encountered by African American communities in New York underpin the conveyor belt of problems they confront.

When Dasani's story appears in a series of articles in the *New York Times* in 2013, the newly elected Mayor, Bill de Blasio, denounces the homeless crisis in New York. 'The kid was dealt a bad hand', argues outgoing Mayor Bloomberg, 'I don't know quite why. That's the way God works. Sometimes, some of us are lucky and some of us are not' (Ibid: 212). He ignores the one million people who have swollen the ranks on food stamps also dealt a 'bad hand' on his watch (Ibid). Dasani is invited to the swearing in of Mayor de Blasio where she comes face-to-face with the city's political elite including the architect of 'success academies'. We learn later that Mayor de Blasio has 'left a trail of disappointments: a still-segregated school system, a public housing system so broken it has required federal intervention, a police department that is far from reformed' (Ibid: 501). The number of homeless New Yorkers, we learn, has climbed from 60,000 to 72,000 since de Blasio took office on a social justice platform (Ibid: 502).

Education for the poor

The reader anticipating that Dasani's brief exposure to headlines and political glad-handing will alter her trajectory will be mostly disappointed. Thanks to her own acuity and educational alertness, and the considerable efforts of her school, she secures a place at the Milton Hershey School, funded by a trust with a controlling share in the Hershey Chocolate Company. Thirty-three per cent of the school's students are black with places reserved for children from families on low income (Ibid: 252). The school resembles a form of child sponsorship by lifting a young person from the mire of poverty and catapulting them into 'the richest private school for children in America' (Ibid: 253). It

does nothing to tackle the systemic causes of Dasani's poverty or her family's, and by separating her from her parents and siblings, it creates anxiety and guilt for the unravelling of the family unit while she is away. Like many children exposed to long-term poverty and stress, Dasani is prone to aggressive behaviour and resistant to authority. She struggles to reconcile her new regimented 'home away from home' with its 'top-notch personal attention' (Milton Hershey School, 2022) and concern about the welfare of her siblings now living without her support.

Dasani would have been helpless, however, to prevent the mushrooming problems that enveloped her family in her absence. Her mother, Chanel, enters cycles of addiction and on treatment programmes and her step-father, Supreme, struggles to maintain the health and well-being of seven children as a private landlord repeatedly ignores a succession of pleas for emergency repairs to their apartment. The alphabet soup of investigating agencies appears more interested in moving the children into foster care than maintaining the family unit with practical assistance that would improve their living environment and welfare. We learn that 'the federal government is giving ten times as much to programs that separate families (most of them poor) as to programs that might preserve them' (Elliott, 2022: 316). To be poor is to be constantly monitored and the author sifts through 14,325 family records in the course of her research reflecting the extent to which the family was tethered to an unending series of meetings with social services and federal agencies and appearances at family courts (Ibid: 532). The logistics of attending these meetings with seven children in tow much less fulfilling the requirements of each agency between meetings is seemingly unconsidered. And, yet, *Invisible Child*, is not sparing of Chanel and Supremes' parental failings nor does it sentimentalise their story to induce pity.

The invisibility of poverty

In an introduction to Jack London's immersive study of poverty in Edwardian England, *The People of the Abyss* (2015 [1903]), author Iain Sinclair describes London's 'social polemic' as demonstrating the 'fault lines of what we are presently experiencing: empty Babylonian towers of spectacular hubris

overshadowing rough sleepers, who must remain invisible under foot' (Ibid: xiii). Andrea Elliott similarly points to the invisibility of chronic poverty when she suggests that Dasani's childhood 'was shaped by the encounter with two worlds – the homeless and the housed, black disadvantage and white privilege, the seen and the unseen' (2022: 518). Her book recalls another immersive study on the invisibility of poverty, Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1940), another book of moral authority marching in step with the dispossessed. *Invisible Child* was researched over eight years and drew upon 132 hours of audio recordings and 28 hours of video with more than 200 interviews conducted. Development educators may be wary of what novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) describes as the 'Danger of a single story' in which one dominating narrative can shape our perceptions and knowledge of a place. Thus, our knowledge and understanding of the entire African American or homeless population of New York can become dominated by or truncated to the life experience of Dasani and her family. However, *Invisible Child* escapes this trap by constantly locating Dasani's family life in the wider context of homelessness, poverty and racism experienced by the African American population in New York and the US in contemporary and historical terms.

Another potential criticism of Elliott could be her role as researcher in influencing the outcome of the story she observes by intervening in it. For example, the stories in the *New York Times* result in donations to Dasani's family which the newspaper puts into a trust. However, as Elliott suggests, 'whatever power came from being in the *Times*, was no match for the power of poverty in Dasani's life' (2022: 522). She refers back to the Old English word for understand – *understandan* – meaning to 'stand in the midst of' in describing her own methodology (Ibid: 520). '[W]e have experienced enough of something new', she says, 'something formerly unseen, to be provoked, humbled, awakened or even changed by it' (Ibid). Few readers of this fine book will be unmoved by its powerful content and some might even be changed by it or moved to try to change the despicable racism and neoliberalism underpinning Dasani's life experience.

References

Adichie, C N (2009) 'The Danger of a Single Story', *TEDGlobal*, July, available: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en (accessed 3 August 2020).

BBC (2021) 'George Floyd: Timeline of black deaths and protests', 22 April, available: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52905408 (accessed 27 April 2022).

London, J (2015 [1903]) *The People of the Abyss*, London: Tangerine Press.

Milton Hershey School (2022) 'The Student Experience', available: https://www.mhskids.org/mhs-experience/a-day-in-the-life/ (accessed 5 May 2022).

National Alliance to End Homelessness (2021) 'State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition', available: https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-2021/ (accessed 11 April 2022).

Orwell, G (1940) *Down and Out in Paris and London*, London: Penguin Books.

Success academy (2022) available: https://www.successacademies.org/about/ (accessed 27 April 2022).

Twain, M and Dudley Warner, C (2001) [1873] *The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-Day*, London: Penguin Books.

Wright, G (2004) 'Coca-Cola withdraws bottled water from the UK', *The Guardian*, 19 March, available: https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/mar/19/foodanddrink (accessed 11 April 2022).

World Bank (2022) 'GDP per capita (current US$)', available: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD (accessed 25 April 2022).

Stephen McCloskey is Director of the Centre for Global Education and editor of *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*. His latest book is *Global Learning and International Development in the Age of Neoliberalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022).