

Structural analysis in the social sciences

Mark Granovetter, editor

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The series *Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences* presents approaches that explain social behavior and institutions by reference to *relations* among such concrete entities as persons and organizations. This contrasts with at least four other popular strategies: (a) reductionist attempts to explain by a focus on individuals alone; (b) explanations stressing the causal primacy of such abstract concepts as ideas, values, mental harmonies, and cognitive maps (thus, "structuralism" on the Continent should be distinguished from structural analysis in the present sense); (c) technological and material determinism; (d) explanations using "variables" as the main analytic concepts (as in the "structural equation" models that dominated much of the sociology of the 1970s), where structure is that connecting variables rather than actual social entities.

The social network approach is an important example of the strategy of structural analysis; the series also draws on social science theory and research that is not framed explicitly in network terms, but stresses the importance of relations rather than the atomization of reductionism or the determinism of ideas, technology, or material conditions. Though the structural perspective has become extremely popular and influential in all the social sciences, it does not have a coherent identity, and no series yet pulls together such work under a single rubric. By bringing the achievements of structurally oriented scholars to a wider public, the *Structural Analysis* series hopes to encourage the use of this very fruitful approach.

Mark Granovetter

IN SEARCH OF RESPECT

Selling Crack in El Barrio

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phers in the United States through the 1970s and 1980s have obfuscated our understanding of the mechanisms and the experiences of oppression. I cannot resolve the structure-versus-agency debate; nor can I confidently assuage my own righteous fear that hostile readers will misconstrue my ethnography as "giving the poor a bad name." Nevertheless, I feel it imperative from a personal and ethical perspective, as well as from an analytic and theoretical one, to expose the horrors I witnessed among the people I befriended, without censoring even the goriest details.²⁴ The depth and overwhelming pain and terror of the experience of poverty and racism in the United States needs to be talked about openly and confronted squarely, even if that makes us uncomfortable. I have documented a range of strategies that the urban poor devise to escape or circumvent the structures of segregation and marginalization that entrap them, including those strategies that result in self-inflicted suffering. I have written this in the hope that "anthropological writing can be a site of resistance," and with the conviction that social scientists should, and can, "face power."²⁵ At the same time, as already noted, I continue to worry about the political implications of exposing the minute details of the lives of the poor and powerless to the general public. Under an ethnographic microscope everyone has warts and anyone can be made to look like a monster. Furthermore, as the anthropologist Laura Nader stated succinctly in the early 1970s, "Don't study the poor and powerless because everything you say about them will be used against them."²⁶ I do not know if it is possible for me to present the story of my three and a half years of residence in El Barrio without falling prey to a pornography of violence, or a racist voyeurism — ultimately the problem and the responsibility is also in the eyes of the beholder.

VIOLATING APARTHEID IN THE UNITED STATES

We love listening to you talk. It makes us laugh. You sound just like a television advertisement.

giggling eight-year-old

My research on the streets of Spanish Harlem almost came to a disastrous end just after the halfway point when I inadvertently "disrespected" Ray, the man who owned the crackhouses where I spent much of my time between 1985 and 1990. It was just after midnight, and Ray was visiting his most profitable sales point to make sure the manager of the late-night shift had opened punctually. Business was booming and the heavyset, thirty-two-year-old Puerto Rican crack entrepreneur was surrounded by his coterie of employees, friends, and wanna-be acquaintances — all eager for his attention. We were on the corner of 110th Street by the entrance to the Lexington Avenue subway station right in front the abandoned four-story tenement building occupied by Ray's dealers. He had camouflaged the ground floor as an after-hours bootleg social club and pool hall. Ray and many of his employees had grown up in this very tenement before its Italian owner burned it down to collect its insurance value. Their corner has long been nicknamed "La Farmacia" because of the unique diversity of psychoactive substances available: from standard products like heroin, Valium, powder cocaine, and crack to more *recherché*, offbeat items like mescaline and angel dust.¹

Learning Street Smarts

In retrospect I wince at my lack of street smarts for accidentally humiliating the man who was crucial not only to my continued access to the crack

scene, but also to my physical security. Perhaps, despite my two and a half years of crackhouse experience at that point, I was justified in being temporarily seduced by the night's friendly aura. Ray was leaning on the front bumper of his gold Mercedes smiling and chatting – happy with life. His followers and employees were also happy because Ray had just treated us all to a round of beers and had promised to order some lobster takeout from the lone surviving hole-in-the-wall Chinese restaurant down the block. We all loved it when Ray was in one of his good moods; it made the man capable of unpredictable largesse, which contrasted dramatically with his usual churlishness. The night was young, and comfortably warm. The emaciated junkies, crackheads, and intravenous coke freaks who gather on La Farmacia's corner twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, had retreated respectfully across the street, occasionally eyeing our closely knit group enviously. We controlled the space.

Perhaps it was also only normal for me to want to bask in my increasingly close and privileged relationship with the "main man." Earlier that week Ray had confided to me the intimate details of his stickup artist past. According to his account, he had specialized in holding up drug spots until he was ambushed by a hidden lookout while fleeing with \$14,000 from a high-volume heroin outlet. It ended with a rooftop shoot-out and a four-and-a-half-year prison sentence for him. His sister posted bail following his arrest by recovering the \$14,000 wad of bills that he had managed to stuff into a half-empty can of roofing tar just before his arrest.

Perhaps my guard was also down because Ray had just made a point, in front of everyone, of buying me a bottle of Heineken's instead of the fifteen-cents-cheaper can of Budweiser that everyone else had received. He had said loudly and clearly for everyone to hear, "Felipe, you drink Heineken's don't tcha'?" I felt even more privileged when I saw that he had purchased a Heineken for himself as well, as if to distinguish us from the run-of-the-mill street drinkers by our distinctively green imported bottles.

Surrounded by all this good feeling and security, I thought it might be a good moment to share my minor media coup from earlier that day: a photograph of me on page 4 of the *New York Post* standing next to Phil Donahue following a prime-time television debate on violent crime in East Harlem.² I hoped this would impress Ray and his entourage, raising my credibility as a "real professor," capable of accessing the mainstream

world of white-dominated daytime television. I was eager to legitimize my presence because there were still a few people in Ray's network who suspected that I was an imposter – nothing more than a fast-talking closet drug addict, or a pervert – pretending to be a "stuck-up professor." Worse yet, my white skin and outsider class background kept some people convinced to the very end of my residence in the neighborhood that I was really a narcotics agent on a long-term undercover assignment.

I noticed Ray stiffen uncharacteristically as I proudly pushed the newspaper into his hands – but it was too late to stop. I had already called out loudly for everyone to hear "Yo! Big Ray! Check out this picture of me in the papers!" A half-dozen of the voices surrounding the large man were already urging him to read the caption on the photo. There was an eager silence as he fumbled awkwardly with the newspaper, not quite knowing how to hold the pages open without having them flap loudly in the gentle breeze. I tried to help by pointing directly to the lines where the caption began. Flustered, he feigned indifference and tried to throw the newspaper into the gutter, but the voices of his admirers were calling out aggressively now for him to read the blurb under my picture. "Come on Ray! What's the matter? What's it say? Read it! Read it!" Unable to save face, he desperately angled the paper to get a fuller beam from the streetlight above us, and screwed his face into an expression of intense concentration. I suddenly realized what the problem was: Ray did not know how to read.

Unfortunately, he tried. He painfully stumbled through the entire caption – ironically entitled "The Calm After the Storm" – his face contorted into an expression akin to that of a dyslexic second-grader who has been singled out for ridicule by his teacher. The eager silence of his followers was broken by embarrassed, muffled giggles. Ray's long-buried and overcompensated childhood wound of institutional failure had burst open. He looked up; regained his deadpan street scowl, threw down the paper, and screamed, "Fuck you Felipe! I don't care about this shit! Get out of here! All of you's!" He then somewhat clumsily pushed his oversized body into his Mercedes, revved the motor, and screeched his tires as he sped away from the corner impervious to the red light, or to the Auschwitz-like survivors on La Farmacia's far curb who dodged his flying wheels and continued to hawk Valium, adulterated heroin, cocaine, and animal tranquilizers.³

Primo, my closest friend on the streets – the central character of this

book and the manager of Ray's other crackhouse, known as the "Game Room," located in a bogus video arcade two doors down from the rat-infested tenement where I lived with my wife and infant child – turned to me with a worried expression, "Yo, Felipe! You dissed the fat nigga'." Someone else picked the crumpled newspaper out of the gutter and started to read the offending article and to comment on the quality of the photograph. Most of the other hangers-on simply lost interest, disappointed that there would be no more freebees from the head drug dealer that night. They straggled back inside the crackhouse to listen to rap music, play pool, and watch anxious addicts pour through the doors clutching handfuls of dollar bills.

The Parameters of Violence, Power, and Generosity

Ray recovered his dignity by redefining his anger as a legitimate concern over the potential breach of security that my exposure in the press represented. The next time I ran into him as he was delivering a fresh shipment of crack vials and picking up the midshift's sales at the Game Room next to my house, he pulled me aside gruffly, speaking in a loud voice for all to hear:

Felipe, let me tell you something, people who get people busted – even if it's by mistake – sometimes get found in the garbage with their heart ripped out and their bodies chopped up into little pieces . . . or else maybe they just get their fingers stuck in electrical sockets. You understand what I'm saying?

He then hurried out to his double-parked Lincoln Continental with black-tinted windows, stumbling clumsily over a curled linoleum fragment in the Game Room entrance. To my dismay, his teenage girlfriend, who was waiting impatiently chewing gum in her powerful lover's car, chose this moment to look up from her scowl and eyeball me intensely. Terrified lest Ray think that on top of everything else I was flirting with his new girlfriend, I stared at the ground and lamely hung my head.

Primo was worried. He had known Ray all his life. As a child, Ray, who is ten years older than Primo, had been the leader of two loosely knit youth gangs that Primo and most of Ray's other employers had been involved with in their early teens: the TCC (The Cheeba [marijuana]

Crew)⁴ and *la Mafia Boba* (the Sly Mafia).⁵ He had taught Primo how to steal car radios and burglarize downtown businesses. I tried to laugh off Ray's warning and recover some of my flustered dignity by cracking one of the misogynist jokes they frequently used to dismiss their boss's nasty mood swings: "The fat yak is on the rag. He'll get over it. Chill out man." But Primo shook his head somewhat apologetically; he pulled me out of the Game Room onto the curb to tell me in a hushed voice, that I should make myself scarce around the Game Room for the next few weeks. "You don't understand Felipe, that nigga' is crazy. He's respected on the streets. People know about him. He was wild when he was a kid. He's got juice." When I interrupted Primo somewhat confrontationally in a loud voice with "You mean you're scared of Ray?" Primo responded with what at that stage in our friendship was still a rare admission of vulnerability,

Hell yeah! I know that nigga' since I was little. He was weird man. Used to think he would rape me or something. Because he's a big nigga', and I'm a little guy back then. I'm only fifteen, boy. And he used to talk crazy shit like, "One of these days I'm gonna get that ass." And I used to wonder if that was true. I never used to dare to be alone with him.

To press his point Primo camouflaged his memories of childhood terror by proceeding casually with an account of how Ray and his best childhood friend, Luis, once raped an old male transient in the empty lot next to the Game Room. I had turned my tape recorder off, unconsciously enforcing the taboo on public discussions of rape. Caesar, however, Primo's best friend who was working as lookout at the Game Room, joined us outside and insisted I document the tale. He mistook my expression of shock to be a sign of fear that someone passing by on the street might be suspicious or angry at seeing a "white boy" holding out a tape recorder to two Puerto Rican men.

Caesar: Take the recorder out, ain't no one going to do nothing to you here Felipe.

Primo: Yeah! They fucked some dirty old man bum in the butt. They followed him in the yard over there [pointing to the garbage strewn rubble to our right].

In Search of Respect

Caesar: Yeah! Yeah!

Primo: Ray and Luis takes turns boning the man in the ass right over there [walking halfway into the lot to mark the spot].

Caesar: Real crazy. Yeah! Ray's a fuckin' pig; Ray's a wild motherfucker. He's got juice. You understand Felipe? Juice! . . . On the street that means respect.

Ignoring Caesar's outburst, Primo proceeded to explain how Ray at that very moment was debating whether or not to have Luis – his fellow rapist, childhood friend, and employee – killed rather than having to spend money on legal fees following Luis's recent arrest while delivering a bundle⁶ of crack to the Game Room crackhouse. Coincidentally, the cost of a murder contract was the same as the fee demanded by Luis's lawyer: \$3,000. Even though Luis – who was also Primo's first cousin – had grown up as Ray's best friend, he was no longer trusted because of his crack habit. He hustled money compulsively from everyone around him, and, worse yet, he had a reputation as a *chiota*, a stool pigeon. It was rumored that several years earlier he had broken down under police interrogation following an arrest for burglary and reported his own godmother's husband for fencing stolen objects.

These assertions and rumors of Ray's ruthlessness and even cruelty were an integral part of his effectiveness at running his network of crackhouses smoothly. Regular displays of violence are essential for preventing rip-offs by colleagues, customers, and professional holdup artists. Indeed, upward mobility in the underground economy of the street-dealing world requires a systematic and effective use of violence against one's colleagues, one's neighbors, and, to a certain extent, against one-self. Behavior that appears irrationally violent, "barbaric," and ultimately self-destructive to the outsider, can be reinterpreted according to the logic of the underground economy as judicious public relations and long-term investment in one's "human capital development."⁷ Primo and Caesar explained this to me in less academic terms early on in my relationship to them.

Primo: It's not good to be too sweet sometimes to people, man, because they're just gonna take advantage of you. You could be a nice and sweet person in real life but you gotta have a little

Violating Apartheid in the United States

meanness in you and play street. Like, "Get the fuck outta my face." Or "I don't give a fuck." That way you don't let nobody fuck with you later.

Caesar: Yeah, like me. People think that I'm wild.

Primo: Out here, you gotta be a little wild in the streets.

Caesar: You've got to be a little wild for this neighborhood, Felipe. [gunshots] What did I tell you?

You can't be allowing people to push you around, then people think that you're a punk and shit like that. And that's the whole point: making people think you're cool so that nobody bothers you.

You don't really want to be a bully or violent or nothing. But you can't let people push you around, because when the other guys see that, they want to do the same thing too. You get that reputation, like, "That nigga's soft."

And there's a way of not having really big fights or nothing, but having the rep – like "That dude's cool; don't mess with him" – without even having to hit nobody.

And then there's the other way of just total violence.

Fully aware of the potential consequences of Ray's public warning in front of the crackhouse, I gave him a wide berth. Primo and his lookout Caesar cooperated fully to protect me. We worked out a *modus vivendi* so that I could continue visiting them at the Game Room during working hours without risking a confrontation with Ray. Primo "hired" one of the addicts on the corner to warn with a whistle whenever he saw Ray's car approaching so that I could slip out of the crackhouse to the safety of my apartment building two doors down.

After several weeks of maintaining this cautious low profile at the Game Room, I was still not rehabilitated. Primo warned me that Ray had foreboding dreams about me:

Ray dreamt you was some kind of agent – like an FBI or CIA agent – no it was more like you was from Mars or something, that you was sent here to spy on us.

Everyone took this symbolic warning seriously because dreams have a powerful significance in Puerto Rican culture. Meshed with the Afro-

Caribbean religious practices of *Santería*, their import may even be greater in the hybrid "Nuyorican culture" of second- and third-generation New York-born Puerto Ricans in the inner city.

My camouflaged visits to the crackhouse continued for almost three more months until finally one night Ray arrived on foot instead of by car, surprising us all in the midst of an uproarious conversation. Primo and I were trying to calm the lookout, Caesar, who had drunk too much rum and coincidentally was venting his resentment of Ray's authoritarianism. Caesar, who was nicknamed "C-Zone" because of the frequency of his drug and alcohol binges, had to be watched closely and taken seriously because of his propensity for gratuitous violence. In our attempts to quiet Caesar down, we had been ineffectively warning him of Ray's rules against obstreperous behavior in his crackhouses.

Caesar: Ray's been riffin' [complaining]? He's gonna come in and say I'm not allowed no more to associate?

Primo: Don't worry. Just don't make no noises. Don't worry about it.

Caesar: I'll tell you about Ray. He's the fattest, laziest, son of a bitch in the fuckin' East. 'Cause he's a drink-Budweiser, be-fat-motherfucker. [pausing to vomit in the trash can at the entrance] He's one of those motherfuckers that whenever the fuck, he feel good, everybody else gotta watch out.

He don't wanta let anybody make money. Well, I teach that nigga' . . . Ah' kill that fat-assed Michelin man. The only reason I don't kill that fat son of a bitch is because I'm going to fuck him up.

[facing me] You recording this shit, Felipe? Fuck you man!

[turning back to Primo] You talking a lotta shit too, Primo, because you're scared of that fat motherfucker. But ah' kill him. Ah' kill that fat motherfucker. I kill him. . . . He's just a black, ugly nigga', a black-a-claus, a fat yak.

[spinning back to me again] I'm scared if I'm sober. I wouldn't talk this shit . . . [pointing to the tape recorder] but since I drunk, I kill that fat son of a bitch.

Understand? [screaming directly into the microphone] Ah' kill that motherfucker!

Primo: [changing his tone somewhat aggressively] You wouldn't do shit.

Caesar: [in an almost sober tone] I would too. I would even murder someone. That shit is like wild. Ah'm'a nut case man. What's the matter? You never thought about that shit, man?

Primo: You must be a simpleton to do something like that.

Caesar: Just think! I should become a wild murderer, man.

Primo: You believe that shit, Philippe?

Philippe: Yes. I believe it. I just don't want to be around when he does the killing.

Right at this point, just as we were on the verge of coaxing Caesar into laughing to defuse his mounting rage, Ray stepped into the Game Room unannounced. My racing adrenaline immediately subsided when Ray merely smiled at me and cracked an insignificant, hostile joke about how skinny I looked and how awkwardly my pants fit. We all laughed with relief – even Caesar, who had suddenly become as subdued and bewildered as me.

Over the next few months my relationship with Ray gradually improved until by the end of a year I had achieved the same levels of confidence with the man that I had originally enjoyed prior to my gaffe in exposing his illiteracy. I remember with relief when he began greeting me, once again, with his usual question, "How's that book comin' Felipe? Finished yet?" thereby communicating to everyone within earshot that I had his formal permission to be prying into his personal business.

Ray's followers did not remain loyal to him solely out of fear and violence. Some of the older members of his network genuinely liked him. He was capable of reciprocating friendship. For example, Candy, an old childhood friend of his and one of only two women who sold for him during the years I frequented his crackhouses, described him affectionately:

He was like a Gumby Bear as a kid. He was always a nice kid.

[pausing thoughtfully] He was wild; but not wild in the sense for you to hate him.

We were like brothers and sisters. He always helped me out.

In Search of Respect

And don't get me wrong, when he gave me money he always did it out of the goodness of his own heart.

The Barriers of Cultural Capital

Whether Ray was a Gumby Bear, a violent pervert, or an omnipotent street don "with juice," my long-term relationship with the man ultimately uncovered a vulnerability that he kept hidden in his street persona. In his private conversations with me over his aspirations for the future, he often seemed naive or even learning-disabled. He was completely incapable of fathoming the intricate rules and regulations of legal society despite his brilliant success at directing a retail network for crack distribution. To borrow the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's analytical category, Ray lacked the "cultural capital" necessary to succeed in the middle-class – or even the working-class – world. Ironically, by the time I left New York in August 1991, my relationship to Ray became problematic once again, but this time because he trusted me too much. He expected me to serve as his cultural broker to the outside world, ultimately demanding that I help him launder his money. It began with a harmless phone call: "Felipe, do you know how I can get a picture I.D.?"

Despite all his cars, and the wads of cash padding his pockets, Ray did not even have a driver's license or any other form of legal identification. He was helpless outside the cocoon of El Barrio's streets. He had no concept of how to deal with bureaucracies. New York City's Department of Motor Vehicles rejected the photocopy of his birth certificate when he applied for a license, insisting that he needed a picture I.D. I explained to him what a passport was, and how to obtain one. Soon he was asking me to accompany him through all the bureaucratic hoops that kept him from being able to operate as a legal entrepreneur. He wanted me to come with him to police auctions to review the lists of tax-defaulted and drug-bust confiscated buildings that the City of New York sponsors several times a year. His dream was to buy an abandoned building, renovate it, and establish a legal business. Careful not to offend the man in any way, I always concocted excuses to avoid unwittingly becoming a facilitator to his money-laundering schemes, which inevitably failed miserably as soon as he encountered institutionalized bureaucracies or any kind of formal paperwork.

Violating Apartheid in the United States

The first legal business Ray attempted to establish was a Laundromat. He was unable to wade through the bureaucratic maze of permits, however, and gave up after a few weeks. He then bought the lease on a bodega, a corner grocery store, and thought he had obtained the rights to its secondhand liquor license and health permit, but ran afoul of the bureaucracy once again and abandoned the project. His most successful foray into the legal economy was his purchase of the lease on a former garment factory a few blocks uptown from the Game Room. He converted it into a "legitimate" social club, renting the space out for parties and selling beer without a liquor license. He was proud of this new operation and considered it legal because he kept it rigorously "clean." He expressly forbade drugs from being sold on the premises. New York City closed the social club down in 1992, following the implementation of the Peoples with Disabilities Act, as it was not wheelchair accessible.

Confronting Race, Class, and the Police

Ray represented only one of the many complex personal relationships and ethical contradictions I had to balance while living in the crack-dealer scene. Before I even was able to establish my first relationship with a crack dealer I had to confront the overwhelming reality of racial and class-based apartheid in America. When I first moved into my irregularly heated tenement opposite a massive conglomeration of high-rise, subsidized housing projects sheltering more than five thousand families,⁸ I was painfully aware of my outsider status whenever I initially attempted to access any street-dealing scenes. The first time I walked home from the subway station I went down a side street that happened to be a heroin "copping corner" where a half dozen different "companies" compered with each other to sell ten-dollar glassine bags with official, ink-stamped logos. I was greeted by a hail of whistles and echoing shouts of "*bajando* [coming down]" – the coded alarms that lookouts posted on dealing corners use to announce the approach of a potential undercover agent to the "pitchers" who make the actual hand-to-hand sales. Everyone began scattering in front of me as if I had the plague; all of a sudden the block was desolate. I felt as if I was infested with vermin, as if my white skin signaled the terminal stage of some kind of contagious disease sowing havoc in its path. On this occasion my feelings were hurt; I had been feeling lonely and had walked a block out of my way to reach this

particularly busy corner precisely because of the exciting bustle of activity surrounding it. In my hopeful naiveté I had thought that the eager knots of pedestrians coming and going signaled the location of one of the street fairs that often grace East Harlem streets like a splash of charm in springtime — relics from a small-town past.

In the long run it was not my conspicuous profile as a potential undercover narcotics agent that became my biggest obstacle to accessing crackhouses and copping corners but, rather, my white drug addict profile. I was almost never harassed by the street sellers; at worst, they simply fled from me or ignored me. On the other hand, I was repeatedly stopped, searched, cursed, and humiliated by New York City police officers on the beat. From their perspective there was no reason for a white boy to be in the neighborhood unless he was an undercover cop or a drug addict, and because I am skinny they instantly assumed the latter. Only one time was I able successfully to impersonate a narcotics officer when stopped by angry police officers. I was in a corner grocery store-cum-numbers joint on my block, buying an ice-cream sandwich and a beer with one of Primo's part-time crack dealer lookouts, when a heavysset white undercover police officer pushed me across the ice-cream counter, spreading my legs and poking me around the groin. As he came dangerously close to the bulge in my right pocket, I hissed in his ear, "It's a tape recorder." He snapped backward, releasing his left hand's grip on my neck, whispering a barely audible "Sorry." Apparently he thought he had inadvertently intercepted an undercover officer from another unit because before I could get a close look at his face he had exited. Meanwhile the marijuana sellers stationed in front of the bodega, observing that the undercover had been rough with me when he searched through my pants, suddenly felt safe and relieved, confident that I was a white drug addict rather than an undercover; and one of them — the tallest and burliest with flashing eyes that suggested recent ingestion of angel dust — promptly came barreling through the door to mug everyone waiting in line at the cash register.

Many of my approximately bimonthly encounters with the police did not end so smoothly. My first encounter with the police was my worst. It was 2:00 a.m. and I was on a notorious crack-copping corner three blocks from where I lived, chatting with a street dealer who was the former boyfriend of one of my neighbors. He had told me to wait with him because his shift had just ended and as soon as the night manager

collected the receipts he was going "to go party" and he wanted me to accompany him. I was eager to please him; happy that I had finally found an entrée into this new and particularly active crack scene. He was already introducing me to his colleagues and competitors as a long lost friend and neighbor of his "ex-girl," thereby finally dispelling their conviction that I was a police officer. All of a sudden a patrol car flashed its lights, tooted its siren, and screeched to a halt next to us. To my surprise the officers called out to me and not to my crack-dealing acquaintance: "Hey, white boy! Come ovah' hea'h." For the next fifteen minutes I found myself shouted at, cursed, and generally humiliated in front of a growing crowd of crack dealer/addict spectators. My mistake that night was to try to tell the police officers the truth when they asked me, "What the hell you doin' hea'h?" When they heard me explain, in what I thought was a polite voice, that I was an anthropologist studying poverty and marginalization, the largest of the two officers in the car exploded:

What kind of a fuckin' moron do you think I am. You think I don't know what you're doin'? You think I'm stupid? You're babbling, you fuckin' drug addict. You're dirty white scum! Go buy your drugs in a white neighborhood! If you don't get the hell out of here right now, motherfucka', you're gonna hafta repeat your story in the precinct. You want me to take you in? Hunh? . . . Hunh? Answer me motherfucka'!

After ineffectual protests that merely prompted further outrage, I was reduced to staring at the ground, mumbling "Yes sir" and shuffling obediently to the bus stop to take the next transportation downtown. Behind me I heard: "If I see you around here later, white boy, ah'm'a take you in!"⁹

I eventually learned how to act appropriately. By my second year on the street my adrenaline would no longer pump in total panic when police officers pushed me against a wall and made me stand spread-eagled to be patted down for weapons and drugs. My accent proved to be a serious problem in these encounters because patrol officers in East Harlem are almost always white males from working-class backgrounds with heavy Irish- or Italian-American dictions. In contrast to the Puerto Rican and African-American children on my block, who used to marvel at

what they called my "television advertisement voice," the police officers assumed I was making fun of them, or putting on airs when I spoke politely to them in complete sentences. I learned that my only hope was to shorten my encounters with the patrol officers by staring at the ground, rapidly handing over my driver's license, and saying "yes-sir-officer" or "no-sir-officer" in minimalist, factual phrases. When I tried to sound sincere, friendly – or even polite – I risked offending them.

Conversely, on the occasions when the police tried to be polite to me their actions only reinforced my sense of violating hidden apartheid laws. On one occasion a squad car overtook me as I was riding my bicycle, to make sure I was not lost or insane: "You know where ya' going? This is Harlem!" Another time as I was sitting on my stoop at sunset to admire the spectacular colors that only New York City's summer smog can produce, a patrolman on the beat asked me, "What're you doing here?" I quickly showed him my driver's license with my address to prove I had a right to be loitering in public. He laughed incredulously. "You mean to tell me you live here! What'sa' matter with you?" I explained apologetically that the rent was inexpensive. Trying to be helpful, he suggested I look for cheap rent in Queens, a multiethnic, working-class borough of mixed ethnicity near New York City's airports.

Racism and the Culture of Terror

It is not merely the police who enforce inner-city apartheid in the United States but also a racist "common sense" that persuades whites, and middle-class outsiders of all colors, that it is too dangerous for them to venture into poor African-American or Latino neighborhoods. For example, when I moved to East Harlem, virtually all of my friends, whether white, black, or Latino/a, berated me for being crazy and irresponsible. Those who still visited me would often phone me in advance to make sure I would meet them downstairs as they descended from their taxis. Indeed, most people still consider me crazy and irresponsible for having "forced" my wife and infant son to live for three and a half years in an East Harlem tenement. When we left the neighborhood in mid-1990, several of my friends congratulated us, and all of them breathed a sigh of relief.¹⁰

Most people in the United States are somehow convinced that they would be ripped limb from limb by savagely enraged local residents if

they were to set foot in Harlem. While everyday danger is certainly real in El Barrio, the vast majority of the 110,599 people – 51 percent Latino/Puerto Rican, 39 percent African-American, and 10 percent "other" – who lived in the neighborhood, according to the 1990 Census, are not mugged with any regularity – if ever. Ironically, the few whites residing in the neighborhood are probably safer than their African-American and Puerto Rican neighbors because most would-be muggers assume whites are either police officers or drug addicts – or both – and hesitate before assaulting them. Primo's primary lookout at the Game Room crackhouse, Caesar, was the first person to explain this to me:

Felipe, people think you're a *fed* [federal agent] if anything. But that's good; it makes them stay away from you.

Think about it: If you was selling shit on the street and you see a white guy coming by, you wouldn't really want to bother with him.

But then again, some people also think, "he's white and he's in the neighborhood, so he must be crazy." If they didn't, they'd just come up to you and crack you in the face and take your wallet.

You're lucky. Look at me, I'm Puerto Rican. If I was to walk into Bensonhurst,¹¹ they would figure, "we could beat the shit out of this dude." They might think that I got to be crazy or something but they will test me or kick my ass.

During all the years I spent on the streets of El Barrio walking around at all hours of the night, I was mugged only once – and that was at 2:00 a.m. in a store where everyone else was also robbed at the same time. My wife, who is Costa Rican, was never mugged and she circulated freely throughout the neighborhood – although she was cautious after dark. During the span of these same years, at least a half-dozen of our friends living downtown in safer neighborhoods were mugged. I do not mean to overstate the safety of El Barrio; my seventy-year-old Filipino landlord was mugged in the hallway of our apartment building in broad daylight while walking out of his ground-floor apartment. As I noted in the Introduction, everyone is conscious of the real possibility of assault. Even the toughest of the drug dealers in Ray's network would ask a friend to accompany them for protection when they were carrying money or drugs after dark.

Violence cannot be reduced to its statistical expression, which would show that most murders and beatings in any given inner-city neighborhood remain confined to a small subgroup of individuals who are directly involved in substance abuse and the underground economy, or who are obviously vulnerable, such as frail, elderly persons. Street culture's violence pervades daily life in El Barrio and shapes mainstream society's perception of the ghetto in a manner completely disproportionate to its objective danger. Part of the reason is that violent incidents, even when they do not physically threaten bystanders, are highly visible and traumatic. For example, during my first thirteen months of residence in El Barrio I witnessed a slew of violent incidents:

- A deadly shotgun shooting outside my apartment window of a drug-dealing woman (who also happened to be the mother of a three-year-old child).
- A bombing and a machine-gunning of a numbers joint by rival factions of the local Mafia — once again, within view of my window.¹²
- A shoot-out and police car chase in front of a pizza parlor where I happened to be eating a snack with my wife.
- The aftermath of the fire-bombing of a heroin house by an unpaid supplier around the block from where I lived.
- A half-dozen screaming, clothes-ripping fights.

None of these particular incidents came close to threatening me physically, but their traumatic nature and prominent public visibility contributed to a sense of an omnipresent threatening reality that extended far beyond the statistical possibility of becoming a victim.¹³ To analyze the very different contexts of South America and Nazi Germany, anthropologist Michael Taussig has coined the term "culture of terror" to convey the dominating effect of widespread violence on a vulnerable society.¹⁴ In contemporary Spanish Harlem one of the consequences of the "culture of terror" dynamic is to silence the peaceful majority of the population who reside in the neighborhood. They isolate themselves from the community and grow to hate those who participate in street culture — sometimes internalizing racist stereotypes in the process. A profound ideological dynamic mandates distrust of one's neighbors.¹⁵ Conversely, mainstream society unconsciously uses the images of a culture of terror to dehumanize the victims and perpetrators and to justify its unwillingness to confront segregation, economic marginalization, and public sector breakdown.

I had a professional and personal imperative to deny or "normalize" the

culture of terror during the years I lived in El Barrio. Many local residents employ this strategy. They readjust their daily routines to accommodate the shock of everyday brutality in order to maintain their own sense of sanity and safety. To be successful in my street ethnography, I had to be relaxed and enjoy myself on the street. I had to feel comfortable while hanging out surrounded by friends and basking in relaxed conversation. This is not difficult during daylight hours or even during the early evening, when El Barrio streets often feel warm and appealing. Children are running every which way playing tag and squealing with delight; one's neighbors are out strolling and often pause to strike up a friendly conversation; a loudspeaker pulses salsa music from a tenth-story housing project window so that everyone on the street below can step in tune for free. In short, there is a sense of community in the neighborhood despite the violence. In fact, most residents even know the nicknames of their more hostile or suspicious neighbors.

Having grown up in Manhattan's Silk Stocking district just seven blocks downtown from El Barrio's southern border delineated by East 96th Street, I always appreciated the shared sense of public space that echoes through Spanish Harlem's streets on warm sunny days. In the safe building where I grew up downtown, neighbors do not have nicknames, and when one shares the elevator with them, they usually do not even say hello or nod an acknowledgment of existence.¹⁶ I enjoyed the illusion of friendly public space that the working-class majority in El Barrio are often able to project during daylight hours. It was the dealers themselves who frequently shattered my sense of optimism and insisted that I respect the violent minority who really controlled the streets when push came to shove. In one particular instance toward the end of my residence I had commented to Caesar in the Game Room that the neighborhood felt safe. His outraged comical response was particularly interesting in that it traced the full ambiguous cycle of the culture of terror by demonstrating the instrumental brutality of the people who were supposed to be protecting us. Both the criminals and the police play by the rules of the culture of terror:

Caesar: Yo Pops [waving Primo over], listen to this. [turning to me] Felipe thinks the block is chill.

Well let me tell you Felipe, what happened earlier today, because all day it was wild on this block. I didn't even have to watch HBO

today. I just had to look out the window and I had a full array of murder and beat down and everything. There was even a fire. I saw an assortment of all kinds of crap out there.

It all started when two crackheads — an older man and a black dude — yoked this girl. They beat her down and took her jewelry. Punched her in the eye; just cold bashed her. She was screaming and the old guy kicked her some more. It was in the daytime like around two.

Then the cops came and caught the muggers and beat them down. There was at least twenty cops stomping out them two niggas because they resisted.

And they should never have attempted that shit because they got the beat-down of their lives. The cops had a circus with the black kid's face. Hell yeah! They were trying to kill that kid. That's why they needed two ambulances.

Homeboy got hurt! Both of them was in stretchers bleeding hard. It wasn't even a body there. It was just a blob of blood that was left over. The cops had pleasure in doing it.

It was not a normal beat-down like: throw-you-up-on-a-car extra hard. I'm talking about "take your turn, buddy" [grinning]; hold 'em right here [punching] and BOOM and BOOM. And this guy goes BOOM [pretending to fall unconscious].

Even 'Buela [grandma] saw it from the window next to me. And she was yelling and someone else was yelling, "Abuse! Abuse! Police brutality!"

If I woulda had a little video camera I woulda sent it to Al Sharpton.¹⁷ Because it was a black dude that they did that beat-down to. Coulda caused a major political scandal and Sharpton woulda been right up here with that wack perm he's got.

Philippe: How does it make you feel to see the cops doing that?

Caesar: I was feeling really sorry for myself because I was thinking about getting hit. I could feel the pain they was feeling 'cause I know what it is to be beat down by cops. They don't let up; they be trying to kill you, man! They do it with pleasure [grinning].

That's stress management right there. That's release of tension. That's my-wife-treated-me-dirty-you'll-pay. That's terrorism with a badge. That's what that is.

The cops look forward to that. They get up in the morning and

go, "Yeah, Ah'm'a' gonna kick some minority ass today." [rubbing his hands together and licking his lips]

I could tell that attitude, because I would be the same if I was a police officer. 'Cause you take the badge for granted. The badge gets to your head. You know what I'm saying? Makes you feel like you're invincible; like you could do whatever you goddamn well please.

I would have the same attitude. I'm going to hurt somebody today. I don't care if he's white or Puerto Rican. And I'm going to have pleasure in doing it. I'm full into it. And I would be a happy married man because I wouldn't fight with my wife.

I don't even know why they have human police officers. They should just put animals out there patrolling the streets. Word up! 'Cause they're worse than animals. It's like they're animals with a mind.

Internalizing Institutional Violence

Although we did have to worry about the danger of police brutality, it was not one of our primary daily concerns. There was always a strong undercurrent of anxiety over the risk of arrest, but we were considerably less worried about being brutalized by the police if they raided the crackhouse compared to what we risked at the hands of our fellow inmates in the holding pen. Judges in Manhattan almost never send anyone to prison for selling or buying small quantities of drugs the first time they are arrested. A hand-to-hand sale of crack to an undercover officer usually results in a two- to four-year suspended felony sentence. I have never even heard of a simple customer being brought to trial — much less being convicted of anything. The problem in an arrest is that one usually has to wait in a municipal jail holding pen for forty-eight to seventy-two hours before being arraigned by the judge in the special Narcotics Court.¹⁸

Our fate in these overcrowded "bullpens" was a frequent subject of anxious discussion. I captured one such debate on my tape recorder. Caesar's non-drug-using cousin, Eddie, was reminding all of us in the Game Room that we risked being sodomized in jail if the police picked us up in a sweep that night. Eddie's father was African-American, and Caesar made sure to racialize his retort as well as demonstrate his superior

technical knowledge of the likelihood of sexual assault in a New York City holding pen.

Eddie: Yo Caesar, don't you come crying to me when they take that ass a' yours downtown and bust your cherry. [laughter]

Caesar: [businesslike] Unnh-uhh! They don't rape niggas in the bullpen no more 'cause a' AIDS. You don't even get raped on Riker's [New York City's biggest municipal jail] no more.

You get raped when you go upstate where they got them big, black, brick-Georgia, Georgia-Tech Bulldog, Black Muslim ham hocks that been in the slammer twenty years.

They be runnin' that little ass a' yours. [jumping to within an eighth of an inch of Eddie's face] Because they bigger than you. They been lifting weights. They big and they take your shit. [spinning around into my face] And they take your arm like this [twisting my arm] and they put it down and they dog it. [spinning around and seizing Eddie in a full nelson] And they jerk it around. [pumping his crotch against Eddie's rear] And you like: [switching roles to grab at his head and pull his hair, shrieking] AHHUUHH.

Because they got their large mammoth, lamabada-blada, Alabama black snake with its magnets out plunging you. Alabama black snake found its way to the assets boy!

[pausing to gauge our hesitant laughter] And they black. And they cruddy. And they smell black. And they big. And they smell like James Brown. And they spit their stuff in your shit. And you gotta be like a lamb and wash drawers and shit, and socks. And you get juiced because you give the biggest niggas' *bolos* [penises] blow jobs. And that's your man [hugging Eddie violently].

And if you're a new nigga' [jumping into my face] and you're a fag and you like it and he want to dog you, you get the big black bogeyman and shit. And they take your ass and stuff it with some mad concrete. They fill your canyon. Word!

And if the faggots like you, they get you in trouble. [spinning back around to face me] And they try to mush 'em, "All right motherfucker, you don't wanta fuck me? I'm back with the black bohemians."

[swinging around again into Primo's face] And they're taking that ass and they make you a fag. And people out on the street, be

recognizing *you!* [swinging his face around yet again to within an eighth of an inch of my nose]

I was especially sensitive to Caesar's harangue that night because the New York City police had just deployed their new elite Tactical Narcotics Teams – appropriately nicknamed TNT – in El Barrio.¹⁹ TNT was founded in 1989 to assuage popular outrage during the height of the national just-say-no-to-drugs hysteria.²⁰ TNT's specific directive was to bust the small, street-level dealer rather than the wholesale supplier. A week earlier, at 2:00 a.m., TNT had arrived in U-Haul trucks to block off both ends of a notorious crack-copping block a few streets down from the Game Room. They rounded up everyone loitering on the sidewalk and even dragged people out of private apartments in the few still-inhabited tenements on the block.

The night of Caesar and Eddie's jousting over jailhouse rape, I had forgotten my driver's license. Not carrying a picture identification is a sure guarantee for inciting police wrath. The recording from this session ends with my voice cursing Caesar through cackles of nervous background laughter:

Philippe: Outta' my face Caesar! What the fuck's the matter with you! You'a fucking pervert, or what?

Primo, I'm outta here. You guys have made me *petro* [paranoid]. I'll be right back though, I'm just going upstairs to get my I.D.

Accessing the Game Room Crackhouse

In my first months on the block, I was not debating complex theoretical points about how the United States legitimizes inner-city segregation, or how victims enforce the brutality of their social marginalization. I was primarily concerned with how to persuade the manager of the crackhouse on my block that I was not an undercover police officer. I remember vividly the night I first went to the Game Room. My neighbor Carmen – a thirty-nine-year-old grandmother who I had watched over the past three months become addicted to crack and transform herself into a homeless ninety-nine-pound harpie abandoning her two-year-old twin grandchildren – brought me over to the manager of the Game Room and told him in Spanish, "Primo, let me introduce you to my neighbor,

Felipe; he's from the block and wants to meet you." Excited at the possibility of finally accessing a crackhouse scene, my heart dropped when Primo shyly giggled and turned his back on me as if to hide his face. Staring out into the street, he asked Carmen in English, loud enough for me to hear clearly, "What precinct did you pick him up at?" I hurriedly mumbled an embarrassed protest about not being "an undercover" and about wanting to write a book about "the street and the neighborhood." I had the good sense not to impose myself, however, and instead slunk into the background onto the hood of a nearby parked car after buying a round of beers. Even in my largesse I managed to prolong the awkwardness by purchasing the wrong kind of beer — an unstreetwise brand whose taste Primo did not like. He was only drinking 16-ounce bottles of a new brand of malt liquor called Private Stock, which was being marketed on Harlem billboards featuring beautiful, brown-skinned women draped in scanty leopard skins and flashing bright, white teeth, to attract a fresh generation of young, inner-city street alcoholics.

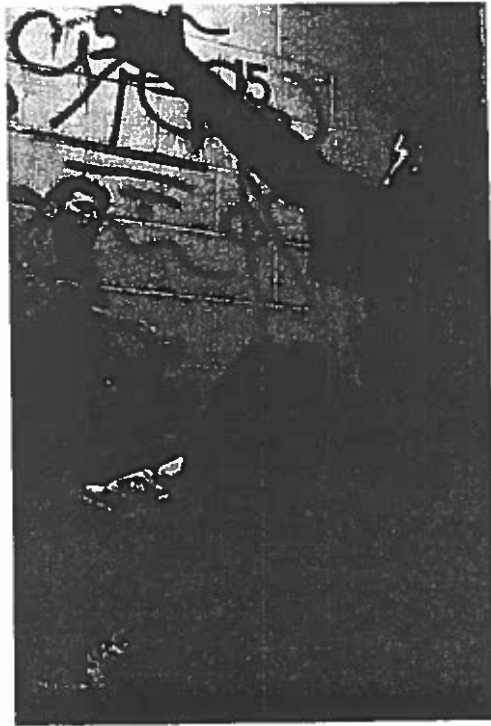
Despite my inauspicious first evening, it took less than two weeks for Primo to warm up to my presence. I was aided by having to pass the Game Room literally every day, and usually several times a day, in order to reach the supermarket, the bus stop, or the subway. Primo would usually be standing outside his pseudo video arcade surrounded by a little clique of teenage girls vying for his attention. At first we just nodded politely to each other, but after a week he called out, "Hey guy, you like to drink beer, don't you?" and we shared a round of Private Stocks with Maria, his fifteen-year-old girlfriend, and his current lookout, Benito — anglicized and commodity fetishized into "Benzie" — a short, loud-voiced twenty-year-old whose exaggerated street swagger hid the limp caused by the dum dum bullet lodged in his left femur.

A few hours, and beers, later my pulse quickened when Primo invited me into the back of the Game Room to where the crack supply was hidden behind a false linoleum panel, and he laid out a dime bag of powder cocaine. It was the "We Are the World" brand, which was sold across the avenue under a half-block-long mural celebrating the late-1980s rock concert of the same title for famine relief in Ethiopia. "You like to sniff too?" Worried that I was going to ruin rapport — or, worse yet, confirm my suspected police officer status — for turning down his offer, I discovered to my surprise that both Primo and his lookout, Benzie, were thrilled to be hanging out with someone who was "such

good people" that he did not even "sniff." This was my first encounter with the profound moral — even righteous — contradictory code of street ethics that equates any kind of drug use with the work of the devil, even if almost everybody on the street is busy sniffing, smoking, shooting, or selling.

Primo, Benzie, Maria, and everyone else around that night had never been tête-à-tête with a friendly white before, so it was with a sense of relief that they saw I hung out with them out of genuine interest rather than to obtain drugs or engage in some other act of *perdición*. The only whites they had ever seen at such close quarters had been school principals, policemen, parole officers, and angry bosses. Even their schoolteachers and social workers were largely African-American and Puerto Rican. Despite his obvious fear, Primo could not hide his curiosity. As he confided in me several months later, he had always wanted a chance to "converse" with an actual live representative of mainstream, "drug-free" white America.

Over the next few weeks, I regularly spent a few hours at the Game Room crackhouse chatting with Primo and whoever else was on duty that shift — either little Benzie or Caesar. To my surprise, I became an exotic object of prestige; the crackhouse habitués actually wanted to be seen in public with me. I had unwittingly stepped into a field of power relations where my presence intimidated people. My next challenge, consequently, was to break through the impressions-management game playing that inverse power relationships inevitably entail. For example, I had triggered within Primo a wave of internalized racism whereby he enthusiastically presented himself as superior to "the *sinvergüenza mameo*' [shameless scum] all around us here." He kept trying to differentiate himself "from all these illiterate Puerto Ricans" who "work in *factorías*." I was especially embarrassed when he began letting me know how good he thought it was for the development of his mind to be talking with me. At the same time, however, he still thought I might be an undercover police officer. Almost a month after I met him, he said, "I don't care if tomorrow you come and arrest me, I want to talk to you. You're good people." It was not until three years later that Primo would casually describe me to others as "the white nigga' who always be hangin' with me." As a matter of fact, I still remember the night when I first graduated to "honorary nigga' " status. Primo had imbibed more alcohol than usual, and I had walked him up to his girlfriend Maria's sister's high-rise project apart-



Tape-recording Primo in his mother's housing project stairwell. Photo: Susan Meiselas.

ment to make sure he would not get mugged in the stairway, because the elevators were broken as usual.²¹ Upon our safe arrival, swaying in the doorway, he grabbed me by the shoulders to thank me: "You're a good nigga', Felipe. You're a good nigga'. See you tomorrow."

It was not until two years later at 2 a.m. in the stairwell of Primo's mother's high-rise project, where Primo and Benzie had gone to sniff a "speedball" (combination of heroin and cocaine), during New Year's week that they told me what their first impressions of me at the Game Room had been. Primo had ripped open a \$10 glassine envelope of heroin and dipped his housekey into the white powder in order to lift a dab to his left nostril. He sniffed deeply, repeating the motion deftly two more times to his right nostril before sighing and reaching out for me to hand him the 40-ounce bottle of Ole English malt liquor I was swigging from.

Benzie, meanwhile, was crushing the contents of a \$15 vial of cocaine inside a folded dollar bill by rolling it between his thumbs and forefingers, which gets rid of any clumps and crystals and makes it easier to sniff. He then dipped a folded cardboard matchbook cover into the inch-long pile of white powder and sniffed dryly twice before laying it down gently in the corner of the stair he was sitting on:

Primo: When I first met you, Felipe, I was wondering who the hell you were, but, of course, I received you good because you sounded interesting; so, of course, I received you good. [reaching for the cocaine] *Te recibí como amigo, con respeto* [I welcomed you as a friend, with respect].

Benzie: [interrupting and handing me the malt liquor bottle] Felipe, I'm going to tell you the honest truth — and he knows it. [pointing to Primo] The first time I met you I thought that you was in a different way. . . . But I would really rather not tell you. [sniffing from the heroin packet with Primo's key]

Philippe: [drinking] It's all right don't worry; you can tell me. I won't get angry.

Benzie: Yeah . . . well . . . [turns to Primo to avoid eye contact with me, and sniffs again] yeah, you remember? I used to tell you, you know, the way he used to talk. The way he used to be. That I thought maybe . . . you know, . . . How you call it? That some people are bisexual. Even though you had a wife, I thought you was like . . . dirty.

It was really 'cause of the way you talk and 'cause of the way you act. You always asking a lot of questions, and a lot of gay people be like that — you know, trying to find out the way you are.

But then after a while, when I got to know you [grabbing the bottle from me], I saw the way you was hanging; and I got to know you better; but still, I always had that thought in my head, "Man, but, but this nigga's a faggot." [drinking]

Primo: [cutting Benzie short] Damn, shut up man! You're going to give Felipe a *complejo* [complex]. [putting his arm over my shoulder] It was just 'cause you was white. He was thinking, "*Quién es éste blanquito?*" [Who is this white boy?]

Philippe: So was it my accent? My voice? The way I move my body?

In Search of Respect

Benzie: Yeah, like your accent . . .

Primo: [interrupting] I told him you were an antropologist, and that the way you speak is just like intelligent talk. I mean you just speak your way. And maybe, we don't understand a few words, but it's all right.

But when you talk Spanish, then you really be sounding different. Then you really be sounding different. You know, when you talk Spanish, you sound like an *Español* [Spaniard].

Even my mother thought you was gay, but that was because she was only talking to you through the phone. [gunshots] One day she asks me [in Spanish], "Who's this little white boy who's always calling here? Is he a *pato* [faggot] or something?" [*Quién es este blanquito que siempre llama aquí? Es pato o algo así?*]

And I said [once again in Spanish], "No! What are you talking about? He is a professor. He speaks Spanish and English and French." [*No! De qué tú hablas? El es profesor. Habla español, inglés, y francés.*]

At the time I heard this, I could not stop myself from feeling some kind of vain personal pique at having been misidentified sexually, because by that time I fancied myself to be at least minimally streetwise. In retrospect I am relieved that during the first few years of my fieldwork I thoroughly misread street cues and did not suspect I was giving off "dirty sexual pervert" vibes. Being self-conscious about my sexual image in the homophobic context of street culture might have interfered with my ability to initiate comfortable relationships with the crack dealers.

African-American/Puerto Rican Relations on the Street

Racial tension in El Barrio is not just focused around whites. Ray's network was intensely internally segregated. It was almost exclusively composed of second-generation, New York-born Puerto Ricans.²² Although Ray himself would be classified as "black" by Anglo society – as would almost half of his employees – most were explicitly hostile to African-Americans. Only two of the approximately two-dozen dealers I met working for Ray were African-American. Both had hispanicized their nicknames: Sylvester, for example, was called Gato, the Spanish word for cat. The other African-American dealer, who went by the name Juan,

Violating Apartheid in the United States

confided to me in private that he found the atmosphere at the social club crackhouse on La Farmacia's corner distinctly hostile:

Blacks and Puerto Ricans really don't get along here. See that plaque there, that says "Latin Family"? Well, some people take that seriously. It's a lot of racism. When I come through the door I have to have an aim and a purpose. If I go and I sit in a seat and I cross my legs, all of a sudden they'll be gathering together, speaking in Spanish, like "Yo, who's that?" They'll even tell you in English, "Yo, you better be chill."

Caesar was more explicit about racial tension in the Game Room – at least when he was drinking.

I'm Klu Klux Klan. Ah' kill black people. You know why I hate black people? Because they're black; they stink; they smell like shit. And they're lazy motherfuckers. I swear to God I hate their fucking guts.

I even hate Puerto Ricans that afro. I hate them like any other black man. [running his hands through Primo's hair] Fuck Primo too, because he's got an afro and he's black. I kill him.

[facing me] I hate whites too. I kill them all. But not you Felipe. You all right, you a good nigga'. But if you didn't hang out with us I'd kill you.

You know why I hate *moyos* [racist Puerto Rican term for blacks] because it was a black man who killed my sister – stabbed her eighteen times in the projects.

They get me pissed off, because why did they got to do these things to me? I'm already fucked up as it is. I hate everybody.

For all his explicit racism, Caesar emulated African-American street culture, which has an almost complete hegemony over style in the underground economy.

I used to want to be black when I was younger. I wanted to be with that black style. 'Cause they're badder. Like *malos* [bad]. Yeah! *Malo malos!* More rowdier.

I liked'ed evil black kids the most because I was learning how to be schemish and steal fruit from the fruit stand and stuff like that.

Plus black people like to dress hard — like rugged. You know what I'm saying? Look wild, like *black*. Black, just being *black*. Cool.

'Cause the Spanish people I used to hang with, their style was kind of wimpy, you know.

Look, right now, it's the *moyos* be bringing in the marked necks and the A.J.'s.

That be the *moyos* with the fly clothes.

Regardless of the complexities of racial tension, class polarization, and everyday street style, in the long term everyone in Ray's network came to accept me — and most people appeared genuinely to like having me around. Of course, there were dozens of other people on the periphery of Ray's scene, or in other dealing networks, who never grew to trust me. This was especially true of African-American sellers and younger Puerto Rican teenage dealers, whose relationship to white society is more self-consciously oppositional—hostile than that of their parents or even their older brothers. Nevertheless, I felt comfortable in my role as "professor" and "anthropologist" writing a book. On several occasions it almost became problematic when marginal members of Ray's network, and even outsiders, accosted me angrily for never tape-recording them, claiming that they "deserved to be at least a chapter" in my book. I had originally worried that the main characters in this book might resent the fact that an outsider was going to use their life stories to build an academic career. My long-term goal has always been to give something back to the community. When I discussed with Ray and his employees my desire to write a book of life stories "about poverty and marginalization" that might contribute to a more progressive understanding of inner-city problems by mainstream society, they thought I was crazy and treated my concerns about social responsibility with suspicion. In their conception everyone in the world is hustling, and anyone in their right mind would want to write a best seller and make a lot of money. It had not occurred to them that they would ever get anything back from this book project, except maybe a good party on publication day. On several occasions my insistence that there should be a tangible political benefit for the community from my research project spawned humiliating responses:

Caesar: Felipe, you just talking an immense amount of shit. Because we talk huge amounts of crap that don't mean a goddamned thing — into the air.

Like, like we on Oprah Winfrey or the Donahue Show — which doesn't mean shit. That's not going to help the community. It's not going to help us. It's not going to change the world in an eensy-weensy bit at all. It's just talk. Flap the lip.

Of course, I hope Caesar is wrong; but maybe his cynicism is more realistic than my academic idealism.

About halfway through my research, the main characters in this book, with whom I have developed deeper relations, began following the details of my writing habits and urging me to make speedier progress. They wanted to be part of "a best seller." For example, when I came down with a debilitating tendinitis in my wrists and forearms from spending too many hours at my word processor, Caesar and Primo became genuinely worried and disappointed. I realized that our relationships had developed an almost psychotherapeutic dimension.

Caesar: [grabbing my arms and twisting them] Don't be giving up on us, Felipe. Don't be fuckin' up. We could beat you up for this.

[turning to Primo] I think Felipe is going out of his mind. I think we're going to have to put pressure on him.

[giggling] You're our role model here. You can't be fuckin' around. We could beat you down for shit like that. Word up!

I ain't lettin' you leave us until I get something in writing with your name on it, as a lifetime reference. You gonna have to give me at least a chapter, regardless. I know my words is going to be in your chapters because my stories is so good that you can't leave them out.

[hugging me] I think the students are becoming more advanced than the teacher here, educational-wise. I think Felipe's in a deep depression. I think he's got a writer's block thing.