

The Capeman and the Vampires

THE MURDERS of Robert Young and Anthony Krzesinski, like most gang homicides, were not premeditated. The boys had stopped at a playground on the way home from a movie, and they lingered to talk to some of their friends before facing the stifling August heat of their apartments. The playground, basically a concrete slab between 45th and 46th Streets, was surrounded by five-story tenements and hidden from the traffic on Manhattan's Ninth and Tenth Avenues. The unlit park was not the sort of place one stumbled on by accident, and local youths went there to smoke marijuana, drink beer, and have sex. Two sixteen-year-old prostitutes brought their customers there to be rolled by local toughs, and it was rumored that male homosexuals cruising Times Square were also lured there and beaten. On a corner nearby stood the White House Bar, headquarters of the last remnants of the West Side's Irish organized crime groups. Although the neighborhood—known as Hell's Kitchen—had been infiltrated by Puerto Rican migrants, "Spanish" boys knew the park was "white" and, except for a couple of local youths, they rarely ventured there and they never went in groups.¹

Thus it was surprising when, shortly before midnight on August 29, 1959, five Puerto Rican boys, including a mysterious caped figure, strutted defiantly into the park. Seeking to avenge a beating suffered by one of their friends, and perhaps expecting to encounter a rival gang, the Nordics, the boys scouted the park carefully before approaching the group of "Americans" chatting on the park benches. They asked if anyone

Opposite page: I.1. The playground between 45th and 46th Streets in Hell's Kitchen.

had seen Frenchy, their friend who was supposed to finger the boy who had beaten him, but no one knew where he was. After retreating into the darkness, the Spanish boys returned a few minutes later, having rendezvoused with the rest of their raiding party, a coalition of Vampires, Young Lords, and Heart Kings. Now twelve or thirteen strong, they filtered back into the park and blocked the exits. One walked over to the Americans and flicked on a cigarette lighter to illuminate their faces while asking if any of them had beaten up a Spanish fellow or belonged to any "clicks." Replying "no" to both questions and growing anxious at the strange encounter, a group of five boys and a girl started to leave, but a Spanish boy blocked their way, declaring, "No gringos leave the park." Another boy, Rogelio Soto, asked if they were liars and hit one of the Americans; suddenly fists were flying, broom handles, garrison belts, and bottles were swinging, a sharpened umbrella was jabbed into a boy's stomach, and the boy with the cape flashed a silver-handled knife that he plunged six inches into Robert Young's back. Two boys grabbed Anthony Krzesinski and held him down while Salvador Agron, the Capeman, stabbed him in the chest, piercing his heart and his lung. While Young and Krzesinski managed to run out of the park despite their wounds, Ewald Reimer was cornered by four boys, who punched him until Agron stepped in and stabbed him in the stomach. Reimer broke free, but was tripped and stomped until someone said, "He has had enough." Meanwhile Young, with the help of his friend Tony Woznikaitis, struggled up the stairs to Woznikaitis's apartment. Woznikaitis recalled, "I pushed open the door and Bobby staggered in. He fell flat on his face on the living room floor. I got some water for him, but he didn't move." Krzesinski ran in the building next door and pounded on doors, crying for help. Sixteen-year-old Edna Zorovich opened her door: "The kid was lying there moaning. He put his hands up and grabbed my wrist. He held on very tight. It hurt. Then he must have died." In a matter of a few minutes, two boys were dead and one was seriously injured, all because of mistaken identity, ethnic tension, and rumors of a rumble.²

The next morning New York awoke to an uproar. Neither Robert Young nor Anthony Krzesinski had been gang members—they were not tough enough according to local youths. Moreover, they were the summer's ninth and tenth gang-related homicides and the third and fourth in a week.³ While there were other innocent victims of gang violence

that summer, this case, far more so than any of the others, captured public attention. Because of the publicity and the volume of documents produced, the case opens a unique window onto the gang world of the 1950s and the issues of ethnic and class marginalization and the problems in defining masculinity that led adolescent males to confront each other on city streets.

NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE

Six narratives of gang violence emerge in the Capeman case. The first appeared in the tabloids in the initial days after the incident and supplied stereotypical images of Puerto Rican gang members. A second narrative, apparent on the streets, is about ethnic conflict. The third narrative, created by public officials, liberals, and the minority communities, was designed to diffuse ethnic conflict by focusing on the violence of individual psychopaths. Prosecutors and police spoke of councils of war and premeditated murder and created a fourth narrative. The fifth narrative belongs to Salvador Agron, who provided his own view of his case and the causes of gang violence. Finally, using a variety of sources, I will reconstruct the gang members' viewpoint of the causes and meaning of gang violence.⁴

The Media's Narrative

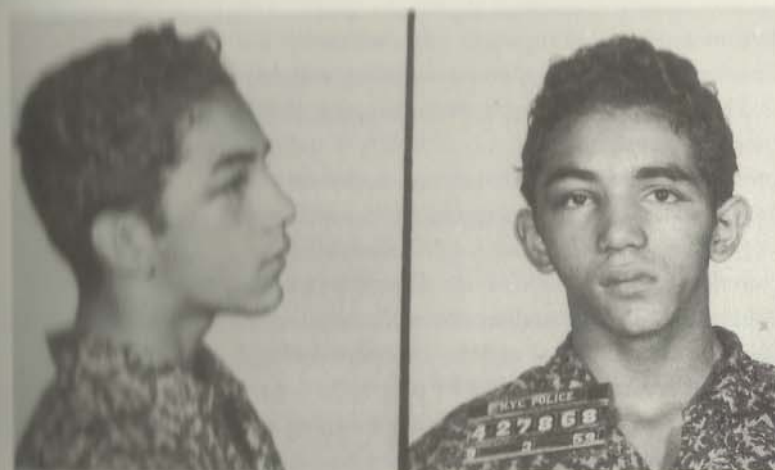
New York's tabloids immediately sensationalized the Capeman case and provided the public with enduring images of it.⁵ The *New York Journal American*, the *Daily News*, the *New York Mirror*, and the *New York Herald Tribune* provided front-page headlines and published lurid photographs of mangled bodies, glaring delinquents, grieving family members, and innocent victims. Pictures of Young and Krzesinski that emphasized their youthful innocence were juxtaposed with shots of their bloodied corpses. Photos of the other attack victims showed bandaged white youths looking stunned at what had befallen them. Then photographs of the raiders appeared as police made arrests and brought in witnesses for interrogation. The newspapers showed them dressed in brightly flowered shirts that emphasized their island origins, and reporters encouraged them to



I.2. Salvador Agron, the Capeman.

provide outlandish or sinister nicknames that stressed their "otherness." Photographers captured the Capeman, Salvador Agron, giggling with his friends and shrugging off the accusation of murder; Tony Hernandez, dubbed the "umbrella man," staring impassively at the camera or seeming to glance admiringly at Agron; Hector Bouillercce, soon to be redeemed as a prosecution witness, sneering defiance; Nestor Hernandez (no relation to Tony), Francisco "Baboo Charlie" Cruz, and José "Frenchy" Cordero all peering with heavily lidded eyes at the viewer as if they were nodding out on heroin. The cameramen egged the boys on and then displayed the "evidence" of their callous disregard for human life. These photographs, the posturing of the suspects, and the names of the gangs—Vampires, Young Lords, Heart Kings—constructed an image of the Puerto Rican as an alien and a predatory gang member.⁶

The press demonized Salvador Agron in particular. The media called Agron the leader of the Vampires and said that he enjoyed masquerading in his cape and leaping out of the shadows to terrify passersby. Reporters wrote that he was known as "Dracula," "Zorro," and "Machine Gun Sal" and had been a member of the Mau Maus, a fearsome Puerto Rican gang in Brooklyn responsible for a number of murders. The *Mirror* went the furthest, calling Agron a "creature of the night" like the vampire he imi-



I.3. Tony Hernandez, the "umbrella man."

tated, and reported that Agron's family "saw him only in his torpid daylight hours." Agron contributed to the creation of his image by seizing the opportunity offered by the press and enacting the tough guy role. Following his arrest, Agron rejected the Bible offered by his mother, declaring, "I don't care if I burn; my mother can watch." After his interrogation by police, Agron faced reporters who asked him how he felt about the killings. Answering with a nonchalant shrug, Agron parried most of the questions until someone asked if he felt like a "big man" appearing before the microphones. Finally losing his temper, Agron snapped, "I feel like killing you," a remark headlined in the papers with the comment that Agron was "still feeling homicidal."⁷

The report that Agron's gang was made up of individuals who were actively or passively homosexual added to the notoriety surrounding the case. Tony Hernandez said that he hung around the Vampires for a "goof" because its social circle included "lesbians and fairies," but, a friend assured reporters, Hernandez really liked girls. It was Agron who was "queer," who apparently enjoyed having sex with other men, and several sources referred to him as the "effeminate hoodlum." Violence, a sexual identity perceived as deviant, and the report that he, like a majority of the defendants, had come from Puerto Rico only to be supported on

welfare in New York made Agron the quintessential outsider, an inhabitant of a subterranean world who had surfaced to wreak terror on the innocent, hard-working, and law-abiding majority.⁸

The image of the Puerto Rican as gang member was not created by the media in the immediate aftermath of the Capeman case; rather the press drew on symbols already familiar to most New Yorkers. *West Side Story*, produced on Broadway in 1957, explored the ethnic hatreds that rippled through New York neighborhoods as Puerto Rican and African-American migrants moved into areas that had traditionally been Euro-American. Bernardo and his Puerto Rican gang, the Sharks, had staked a claim to the turf of Riff and the Jets, who declared, "We fought hard for this territory and it's ours." The play had a humane vision, it portrayed the aspirations of Puerto Rican migrants sympathetically, it explored the similarities between the Puerto Rican and Euro-American gang members, and it pointed out the futility of violence. But *West Side Story* also trafficked in the symbols of gang culture: switchblades, colors, midnight rumbles, boys in pompadours and leather jackets. The play, which drew power from the newspaper stories of ethnically based gang conflict that were posted at rehearsals, created a language and a reservoir of symbols that the public detached from the context of the play and used to interpret gangs. None of these symbols was more potent than that of the knife-wielding Puerto Rican gang killer.⁹

Yet the response to the Capeman case was not merely a construction of the media or of popular writers. It would be a mistake to interpret the reaction to the case simply as testimony to the vivid imaginations of headline writers and the ability of the press to tap and enlarge ethnic stereotypes. Although the press certainly helped arouse the Euro-American population, the images wielded by the media were so resonant because they captured emotions expressed on the streets, and most of those emotions had to do with what people called "race."

The Narrative of the Streets

The killings stirred the "racial" resentments that lurked beneath the surface of daily life. "Race" is not an essential or unchanging biological category, but a social one used by groups to distinguish among themselves in the competition for goods and resources. As a social construct,

"race" is a fluid term with different meanings in different points in time. In mid-twentieth-century New York, the city's predominant groups—Jews, Germans, Italians, and Irish—were still referred to as "races," and conflict among them had shaped politics, access to relief, and the organization of the economy. After World War II, the massive expansion of African-American and Puerto Rican communities redefined these categories, created unity among Euro-American groups around their "white race," and focused resentment on the newcomers.¹⁰ Adult competition for housing, jobs, and the perquisites of political life fueled the confrontation among adolescent groups, while efforts by African Americans to integrate New York's schools in the 1950s led to boycotts and threats of violence by Euro-American parents.¹¹ In such a context, incidents such as the Capeman killings easily reignited the smoldering embers of "racial conflict."

The sharpest reaction, understandably, came from local residents who knew the victims of the gang attack. Monsignor Joseph McCaffrey, the parish priest who said the requiem mass for Anthony Krzesinski, used biblical metaphors in his sermon, comparing the Puerto Rican gang members to beasts who needed to be caged. McCaffrey whipped up already tense feelings, declaring, "Let us meet force with force in this war against juvenile criminals." Similar sentiments echoed in the streets near the precinct house. As the number of individuals arrested and interrogated grew, hundreds of spectators gathered outside calling for a lynching and chanting, "Kill the spics, kill the spics."¹²

Letters to the newspapers and to New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller repeated expressions of ethnic hatred. Correspondents recommended vigilante patrols, greater discretion for police use of force, proposals for better access to welfare, and pleas to stop coddling criminals. In the fifteen days of September, an average of fifty-eight letters or telegrams arrived per day at the governor's office expressing concern about delinquency and gang violence. Although the number declined by half over the next several weeks, the outpouring was sufficiently notable to merit a special memorandum to the governor's staff. About a quarter of the correspondents were from out of state, others were not city residents and about a fifth offered constructive advice or pleaded with the government not to succumb to prejudice. But many of the letters from city residents depicted violence. For example, one Park Avenue resident proposed that

mother arranged for him to visit his father and then helped him flee to New York. He returned in November 1958, but again was unable to get along with his stepfather. Salvador alternated between staying with his sister, who had married at age fifteen to escape the family, and sleeping in abandoned buildings. Finally, he found refuge in a street club, the Vampires, whose president lived with a thirty-year-old male lover and where Agron's sexual identity was not an issue.²⁵

The Salvador Agron revealed in court records possessed all of the traits of the socially marginal. He was a member of a minority group, a school dropout, a delinquent, a welfare recipient, he engaged in same-sex relations, and he exhibited symptoms of psychosis. He served as *prima facie* evidence that gangs attracted severely disturbed individuals who might explode into violence at any moment. With case histories such as these as evidence, commentators created a convincing narrative that gangs were loose collections of the aberrant.

A Narrative of Crime and Punishment

None of the elements of the first three narratives was apparent in the fourth narrative—the one the district attorney prepared for the jury. Where the tabloids wanted to boost sales and give expression to white outrage, and liberal officials and minority group leaders wanted to tamp down ethnic hostility, the district attorney only wanted to gain a conviction. In order to prosecute Salvador Agron and his co-defendants for first degree murder, the district attorney had to make a case for premeditation, not random violence. Agron had to be seen as a calculating gang leader plotting the raid that led to Young and Krzesinski's deaths, not an out-of-control psychopath. The prosecution had to emphasize the immediate sources of conflict, not some larger explanation of the social forces impinging on gang members. Therefore, the prosecutor's narrative is framed most narrowly, focused only on who did what to whom.

The police discovered that the immediate cause of the playground attack was a dispute over drugs. José "Frenchy" Cordero had apparently offered to sell some "reefers" to the mother of John Diaz, a Puerto Rican boy who lived in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood and who was an accepted visitor in the playground. When Diaz heard about the attempted sale, he was outraged and threatened Frenchy with a beating. To gain

revenge, Frenchy made up the tale that he and other Puerto Ricans had been beaten up by American boys in the playground. The incident, according to police, had nothing to do with "race" and was the product of a warped imagination.²⁶

The district attorney was faced with explaining why the Vampires, Heart Kings, and Young Lords rushed to Frenchy's defense when many of them did not know who he was. To do this, the prosecutor described a meeting of gang members on a street corner before the attack as a council of war among several "organizations" and argued that the three gangs had discussed forming an alliance. He maintained that Frenchy's tale provided the gangs with an opportunity to prove their courage and cement their ties.²⁷

The district attorney also had to supply Salvador Agron with a motive for killing two boys whom he had never met. The prosecution portrayed Agron as a vicious gang leader who wanted to become president of the gang and who used the attack in the park as the occasion to solidify his position. The press, caught up in its own creation of the Capeman, never questioned the accuracy of this image. Though the district attorney's narrative made for a good story and rationalized his choices for prosecution, it was the weakest point in the state's case against Salvador Agron.

Agron possessed none of the characteristics of gang leaders. At sixteen he was the youngest of the Vampires—which included men in their twenties—and he was physically not as strong as most adolescents his age. He had been rebuffed continuously by gangs and had been attacked on several occasions, none of which was conducive to high status as a gang member. Social workers described him as passive aggressive, always provoking conflict but unable to handle its consequences.²⁸ Far from being a leader, Agron was eager for acceptance. He may have wielded the knife in the rumble to prove he had heart, or he may simply have felt it necessary to be armed given his lack of physical prowess. Whichever was the case, it seems clear that Agron found in the Vampires the sense of belonging and acceptance that was missing in his home and elsewhere in his life. He was willing to do anything to preserve this sense of security even kill. But it is very unlikely that he led the Vampires into action.

It is also doubtful that Agron acted with the premeditation demanded by the first-degree murder charge brought against him. The court testimony shows that the knife used in the killings belonged to Johnnie Rej

its editorial cartoons, portrayed juvenile delinquents as untamed savages with blood-drenched hands, but without any discernible ethnic characteristics. While African Americans, Puerto Ricans, white liberals, and elements of the press stressed the social conditions that produced delinquency, they could agree with conservatives that gang members were deranged and murderous thugs in need of restraint.²¹

Certainly there was much in the Capeman case to support the view that gang members were social misfits who engaged in violence for "kicks." According to the district attorney's records, the group of boys who went to the playground on 45th Street expected to meet five or six hundred Italian or Irish boys. Apparently some of them did not know each other's names, and only a couple were friends with Frenchy, whose honor they were supposedly upholding.

The participating gangs had little apparent reason to protect Frenchy or defend his access to the park. They represented different neighborhoods: the Heart Kings came from Second Avenue between 117th and 119th Streets on the edge of Italian East Harlem, while the Young Lords (80th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus Avenues), and the Vampires (72nd Street and Broadway) were from the West Side of Manhattan, but many blocks from the Hell's Kitchen area. The playground at 45th Street was not adjacent to anyone's turf, it did not hold a resource (such as a swimming pool) that might attract youngsters from around the city, and there was little reason to contest anyone's ownership of it. Even within the logic of the gang world, the raid made little sense.²²

The foray seemed to be the product of little planning, again suggesting its seemingly random nature. According to the police, the boys did agree to meet around midnight on August 29 at the playground and to bring knives, "gasoline bombs," and a shotgun. But some boys thought their enemies were Irish, while others claimed they were Italian, or just "Americans." A couple of boys agreed to go along at the last minute. No one seemed to know how many boys might be waiting for them or the exact strength of their raiding party. Their initial purpose, while not exactly innocent, was to walk the street: to challenge the enemy by swaggering as a group through the heart of his turf, which, of course, meant going armed. Failing to find any challenge on the street, the boys returned to the playground. Young, Krzesinski, Reimer, and the other victims of the attack just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong

time. Frenchy, who instigated the raid and who was supposed to bring the Molotov cocktails, never showed up. It was easy to interpret the incident as the product of an aimless search for excitement—typical of gang activity, according to most adults.²³

The raiders also seemed to fulfill the expectation of politicians, investigative reporters, and social scientists that only the maladjusted participated in gang violence. Several of the youths had arrest records and had spent time in reformatories. Each youth's life seemed to be a variation on a similar theme: a migrant from Puerto Rico, often alienated from family, out of work or only occasionally employed, unskilled, a school dropout. Rogelio Soto quit school at age sixteen to work as a Western Union messenger before taking a job in a factory making the ribs for umbrellas. At the time of the incident, he had been unemployed for several months. His mother had divorced her husband back in Puerto Rico and had moved to New York in the late 1940s with her two children. Raphael Colon, twenty-seven, homeless, had arrived from Puerto Rico four years earlier and worked as a dishwasher. Colon slept in the homes of other gang members or in the halls or on the roofs of apartment buildings. Francisco Cruz, seventeen, president of the Heart Kings, worked as a painter's helper and contributed \$15 a week to supplement the incomes of his stepfather, a truck driver, and his mother, who worked in a Hoboken, New Jersey, candy factory. Cruz had migrated from Puerto Rico in 1937, and, unhappy in New York, he had discussed returning to the island. José Rivera, twenty, vice president of the Vampires, worked in a candy factory in Brooklyn and he was married with a four-month-old daughter. Tony Hernandez, seventeen (the "umbrella man"), came from Puerto Rico in 1949 and lived with his father, who worked in the linen room of the Hotel Victoria, his stepmother, who was a garment worker, and three siblings. Hernandez had quit school after the seventh grade and tried to get a job but was unsuccessful. He had spent twenty months in reform school, where he won trophies for weight lifting. Despite his strength, Hernandez was small and apparently ran away from home after being threatened by a gang and moved into an apartment on 77th Street, where he joined the Vampires. He had a reputation as a sharp dresser and it was implied that he earned his money as a prostitute. Nestor Hernandez, seventeen, vice president of the Heart Kings, had come from Puerto Rico three years earlier to live with his mother and stepfather. He

had gone to school for seven years in Puerto Rico and for nearly two years in New York, but he had a limited command of English. He also worked in a factory. Frenchy Cordero, eighteen, held as a material witness in the case, had come from Puerto Rico three years earlier and worked in a delicatessen. He had recently lost his job and had served some time in a reformatory for rolling drunks and for attacking a teacher. Hector Bouillercé, seventeen, who became a witness for the prosecution, had lived in New York since he was eleven. He had recently quit his job as a photo printer to join the Marines. Only shared ethnic and class marginality linked these youths together.²⁴

It is clear in retrospect that the raiders were the sons of New York's Puerto Rican working class—and very similar in situation to Robert Young and Anthony Krzesinski. Several came from homes broken by desertion or divorce and had spent some time supported by welfare, but it is more notable that their parents, like most Puerto Ricans and African Americans, were participants in the low-wage and unskilled service sector of New York's economy. Most of the youths seemed fairly responsible, holding jobs as messengers or delivery boys to help support their families. After their arrests, however, the press directed attention to the raiders' lack of full-time employment, to their truancy from school, to their records as delinquents, and to their idling on street corners waiting for trouble to happen. These factors fit the stereotype of the violent gang member.

Of all the members of the raiding party, Salvador Agron appeared to be the most severely disturbed. Agron had spent most of his early childhood living in a Catholic poorhouse in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. His mother, Esmeralda Rodríguez, eloped at thirteen with a thirty-two-year-old street cleaner, Gumersindo Agron. Esmeralda bore two children, including Salvador, born in 1943, before fleeing from her husband's beatings and taking refuge in the poorhouse. Except for about a year with his father, Agron lived in the institution for the next eight years. There the children were kept in the nursery, which was segregated by sex, and Salvador was allowed to see his mother only on Sundays or on those occasions when he was able to steal his way into her quarters. Agron ran away frequently, claimed that he heard voices telling him to do bad things, and upon several occasions slashed his body with razor blades. By the time Salvador left Puerto Rico at age nine, he had spent virtually his

entire life separated from his family, had showed symptoms of psychosis, and was unable to read or write.

Esmeralda Rodríguez divorced and remarried. Her new husband, Carlos Humateo, a self-proclaimed Pentecostal minister, brought her and her daughter to New York in 1951. Salvador remained behind in the asylum until his parents sent for him the following year. The family lived in a three-room cold-water flat on the Lower East Side until moving to an established Puerto Rican community in the Navy Yard section of Brooklyn. Salvador's mother worked in a belt factory and his stepfather in a blue-print factory, and they left the children to their own devices during the day. Agron's stepfather proved to be an unsympathetic parent. Neither Salvador nor his sister, Aurea, were allowed to dance, sing, play the radio, or hang nonreligious pictures in the home. To keep the children from eating too much, the parents padlocked the refrigerator. Aurea found her education in school, but the other students disliked Salvador and called him "crazy." He constantly skipped school and spent most of his time on the streets avoiding his stepfather's beatings. Eventually, Salvador's parents took what for a Latino family must have been an especially difficult step. They admitted familial failure and Salvador's stepfather entered a delinquent child complaint in Children's Court in July 1953. Salvador was again institutionalized at age eleven, first in the Youth House for observation and then in the Wiltwyck School for Boys.

The Wiltwyck School, despite its progressive reputation, did little for Salvador besides providing him with some instruction in English. He was released in 1956, having reached the age limit of thirteen, and returned to his parents' home in Brooklyn. Again he rarely attended school and, instead of being a tough gang member, he was a victim of gang beatings. His mother returned him to Puerto Rico, where he lived with his aunt for a short time before she passed him on to his father. The senior Agron, disabled by a stroke, was no better equipped to handle Salvador than were his mother and stepfather, and Salvador ran the streets until he was committed to a reformatory for assaulting another boy. Salvador's behavior declined even more rapidly in the reformatory. He banged his head against the walls and claimed he saw demons in his room and heard voices. Salvador was handsome and he engaged in sexual relations with other boys at the reformatory despite the efforts of the directors to prevent it. He ran away several times but was always recaptured, until his

the president of the Vampires and that it was acquired by José "Pepe" Rivera, the vice president, for use in the rumble. Pepe supplied the knife to Agron, who carried it to the playground. Witnesses related that Agron had declared he was going to stab someone, but he had made similar claims before. Agron himself maintained that though he wanted to hurt someone with the knife "he didn't think that it might kill him." Agron made his statement to the assistant district attorney after having spent four days without food hiding in a tenement in the Bronx and after being subjected to eleven hours of questioning by police, who also failed to provide either food or water or to inform Agron that he had a right to counsel. Police routinely abused prisoners, and several of Agron's co-defendants testified to receiving the "third degree" at the hands of police and showed evidence of bruises. Yet even in this state, Agron only admitted to wielding the knife and the police could not elicit a statement of intent to commit murder.²⁹

Questions can also be raised about Agron's ability to distinguish between right and wrong. Several social workers and probation officers had noted his "schizoid traits," and his history of delusions and bizarre behavior was available to the court at the trial. A psychiatric evaluation performed in 1965 concluded that he was not psychotic: "Psychiatric examination at this time reveals a cooperative male who makes excellent contact with the examiners. His speech is relevant and coherent. His sensorium is clear. No delusions nor hallucinations were elicited. His affect is appropriate."³⁰ An examination performed six years later is not evidence of his state of mind in 1959, but it is notable that his attorneys did not attempt an insanity defense. It is likely that Agron met the legal standard of sanity despite the evidence of his occasional delusions. Ultimately, the issue of Agron's sanity is less important than that of his image.

The Agron presented to the jury by the prosecution was a ruthless gang leader who participated in an elaborate council of war and who swore to stab anyone who got in his way. Agron made the district attorney's narrative much more convincing by his behavior. He seized the limelight offered him, for this was his moment of triumph, his only recognition as a man worthy of note. His public statements and his swaggering before the press fit the image of the Puerto Rican gang killer so much in the public consciousness and helped to convict him.

The jury that convicted Agron was primed to do so. New York had an English language literacy test for voters, and, as a result, about half of New York's Puerto Ricans were excluded from the polls. Since jury lists were drawn from the pool of eligible voters, Puerto Ricans were severely underrepresented on jury panels. For example, only three individuals of Puerto Rican birth appeared on a grand jury panel of two thousand persons in 1959. In New York, one also had to believe in the death penalty in order to be a juror for a capital case. As a result, the jury that convicted Agron was an all-male, all-white jury that was unrepresentative of the city's population and probably disposed to view the exploits of Puerto Rican gang members harshly. They found Salvador Agron guilty of first degree murder and made no recommendation for mercy. Both Agron and Tony Hernandez, the youngest of the defendants, received the death penalty; the other five defendants were found guilty of or had pled guilty to manslaughter charges and received lesser sentences. Although Hernandez's conviction was overturned on appeal, giving him the opportunity to plead guilty to manslaughter, and Agron's death penalty was eventually commuted, their convictions represented white New York's revenge.³¹

The Narratives of Salvador Agron

Salvador Agron offered his own—conflicting—narratives of gang violence, although they appeared years after the fact. In a letter to the *New York Times* in 1975, Agron argued that during the wave of teenage gang violence in the 1950s, "One either fought or one either [*sic*] became the punching bag of rival gangs." He blamed New York's social agencies for not redirecting the energies of young people and he noted in his own case the absence of parental guidance and the influence of a pervasive "Bohemianism" that undermined traditional moral values. (Bohemianism may have been a veiled reference to his engaging in sex with other males.) He explained that "in becoming a victim of my social condition it made me act in a way as to make victims of others." Agron maintained that he had been redeemed while in prison: when "facing the shadow of death, it occurred to me that one must do his best to take evil and turn it into good. It is due to this acknowledgment of life and reality that I have been able to maintain the little humanity that was left within me

Agron was hoping to be paroled at the time, and he went on to make a case for his rehabilitation. "I have learned how to write poetry, received my high school equivalency, put legal petitions together in block letters. . . . I have also received my regents diploma, and at the present time . . . I have received college credits." He argued that everyone imprisoned for gang violence in the '50s was back on the streets. He asked, "How much is enough? How long does it take to correct or rehabilitate a first time offender?"³²

Not until another four years had passed did the state of New York agree that he was rehabilitated. In 1979, on the verge of his release from prison, Salvador Agron gave an interview to the *New York Times*. By this time his tone had changed. Now he claimed to have been a "gang leader" who at sixteen had been "proud of his exploits in crime with the Mau Maus in Brooklyn and the Vampires of the West Side of Manhattan." He said that he had been a founding member of the Vampires, who had gone to the park to confront the Nordics. However, he maintained that he could not remember "actually plunging the knife" into anyone, and he claimed that his confession to the killings was false. "Somebody in that park did it and it wasn't me. I just took the blame. I had a nasty attitude . . . [and] I said here are the cameras, it was my chance to sort of jump back at society and I started insulting people back. I was exaggerating." According to the rules of the Vampires, the youngest member took the blame in a crime, and Agron was the youngest. "My cape had no blood. My knife had no blood. The other knife with the blood of the victim was suppressed by the prosecution. It was forgotten. But I can't feel the guilt." He argued that there no longer was any point in lying: "I've done the time for it. But the truth is the truth."³³

What was the truth? Agron's first account was in many ways self-serving. He wrote it to arouse sympathy, to place the murders in a larger context, and to make a case for his rehabilitation and parole. Agron did not mention his exploits as a gang member, and he made no attempt to avoid responsibility for the murders. By the time of the second account, his release had already been agreed to and one might argue that with everything decided Agron could afford to be more honest. Instead, he postured for the press. Agron invented himself as a member of the Mau Maus and a founder and leader of the Vampires, even as he denied responsibility for the one act that gave credence to his account. Apparently

Agron still yearned for recognition, for respect, for manhood, even as shrank from the deed that in the gang world bestowed these attributes upon him.

Masculinity and the Gang

There are few hints in the district attorney's records, the court transcripts, or the newspapers about the defendants' worldview, their understanding of violence, or their justification for it. This—the gang member narrative—must be pieced together from a variety of other sources, as it anticipates some of the arguments made in the remainder of the book. According to gang members, they fought purposefully, according to established norms, and did so for ethnic honor, personal reputation, and to defend their masculinity.

Gangs battled over resources, and these struggles took on a meaning much larger than access to a specific site, becoming especially intense when the opponents were of a different "race." Schoolyards, parks, and playgrounds usually belonged to a specific gang and had to be defended against outsiders or wrested away from the dominant group. Gangs seeking to gain "rep," or a reputation for being tough, were relentlessly expansionist, defeating and incorporating elements of other gangs into their group and staking claim to a widening sphere of influence until they met an equally powerful foe. Settlement houses, schools, or boys' clubs, which were supposedly neutral sites, usually sat square in someone's turf, and while the institution might ban gang paraphernalia and try to settle disputes through mediation, the streets outside were the scenes of a violent gauntlet as gangs fought to control admission. Truly rare commodities like swimming pools engendered the greatest conflict; members of the out group traveled there only in numbers large enough to fend off an attack, which in itself was provocative.³⁴ Control over facilities conveying power and prestige, usually in excess of their use value, and battles over access became a contest over the relative ability and worth of the competing groups. From this perspective, a fight over access to a playground, even a barren slab of concrete, was anything but a senseless conflict.³⁵

Since a raiding party entered enemy turf and expected to be attacked, it went armed. But gang members rarely went on a raid with the expectation of killing or being killed. Rumbles and raids were designed to terror

ize an opponent, to enhance one's reputation, to drive another group from an advantaged position or from possession of a resource, and to test the manhood of a foe or of a newly initiated member. In the process, both gang members and bystanders were hurt and sometimes died. Gang weapons became deadlier over time as shotguns, Molotov cocktails, and handguns replaced homemade zip guns, car aerials, switchblades, bicycle chains, and lead pipes, and this had an obvious effect on fatalities. But death was a by-product of violent confrontation and not its chief object; rumbles were like combat in war—a few moments of intense, exhilarating, terrifying, and random action. Killing was something that gang members were aware of and accepted fatalistically, but it was rarely premeditated.³⁶ When the Vampires, Young Lords, and Heart Kings descended on the playground, they were prepared for mayhem, not murder.

Contrary to the impressions of adults, gang victims were not chosen randomly. Gangs rarely targeted adults, young children, or female adolescents, and gang members largely avoided attacking "coolies"—young males who were known not to be gang members. Violence was applied "rationally": reputations were made only by confronting equals, who by their style, walk, and language indicated that they were "down boppers." Gangs looked for signs of gang membership—capes, berets, narrow-brimmed alpine hats, canes, and other gang paraphernalia—when planning an attack. However, in the absence of telltale signs, other markers were used. Gender, ethnicity, and age were convenient substitutes, and adolescent males in enemy turf were presumed to be members of enemy gangs. Of course this meant that coolies in other neighborhoods—boys such as Robert Young and Anthony Krzesinski—were sometimes the mistaken victims of gang assaults.³⁷

Ethnic hostility almost certainly had a part in the case. The assembled Vampires, Heart Kings, and Young Lords believed Frenchy's tale about being beaten up by American boys because it fit their experience. Euro-American gangs, with at least the tacit support of adults, enforced neighborhood boundary lines by violently assaulting minority group members, particularly adolescents, who crossed them. Retaliatory raids occurred not only to gain revenge but to defy attempted intimidation, to assert that a group had a place in society and the right to use public streets and public facilities regardless of what others thought. Asserting control over the playground at 45th Street was an attack on white domination

and an assertion of Puerto Rican honor, and gang members understood it as such. (For example, some African-American gang members in Harlem showed their understanding of the case by treating the defendants as heroes and carrying newspaper clippings about the incident in their wallets.)³⁸

Honor and masculinity, as sociologist Ruth Horowitz has found, were the most important components of the gang members' worldview because they were at the core of their identities.³⁹ Masculinity is socially constructed and opportunities to define it are dependent on social context. In working-class New York, this meant masculinity was created in the streets by showing dominance over other males, fearlessness in confrontations, and adeptness in the performances of street life. Puerto Rican adolescents, already marginalized by class, language, and ethnicity, found few legitimate means for establishing a masculine identity. Like other boys from working-class neighborhoods, they joined gangs because they failed at school, had miserable home lives, were excluded from the job market, or knew that they qualified for only the most menial positions. Gangs provided a means of transcending these circumstances, of allowing adolescents to establish themselves as part of a "street elite," and to define a masculine identity in spite of the humiliations of everyday life. In gang life, adolescent males proved themselves, acquired respect and honor, and demonstrated their masculinity by humbling a foe. Violence arose out of the need to meet these intangible goals.⁴⁰

Cross-cultural analysis of masculinity suggests that it is frequently defined through aggressive, risk-taking behavior, and those who fail to pass public tests of masculinity are derided as being feminine or childlike.⁴¹ In the gang world, this polarity was defined through "heart" and "punk." To have heart meant to be daring and courageous, to be a reliable fighter, to be manly; being called a punk was the worst insult imaginable, one that implied cowardice, weakness, and effeminacy. (In fact, the term "punk" was used along with "fuckboy" to define the passive or "femal" role in the prison homosexual hierarchy and indicated someone who was weak and could be dominated or raped.) Having heart meant a willingness to fight, regardless of the odds, and to withstand death or a beating instead of backing down. Even enemies could respect each other for having heart; no one respected a punk.⁴²

Honor and masculinity for those marginalized by the larger society were difficult to attain, readily threatened, and vigorously defended. The case histories of the young men in the Capeman incident suggest that they faced uncertain job prospects, were alienated from school, and desired recognition and prestige. The readiest way for them to obtain recognition was in the public arena provided by gang conflict. A reputation that inspired fear in others—that of being a down bopper or a cold killer—was a gang boy's most valued and most vulnerable possession, one that simultaneously ensured safety and challenge on the street. A reputation brought the pleasure of recognition, but required constant defense against the slurs, imagined and real, of others.⁴¹ The rumored beatings of Puerto Rican boys by the Euro-American youths who frequented the 45th Street playground could not go unchallenged, for too much was at stake. Within the gang world, attacking members of what was seen as a rival group—even if unarmed—was both honorable and necessary.

For Agron and the Vampires, the challenge to masculinity may have been more pointed. As individuals who engaged in same-sex relations, they probably felt an extra spur to prove that they were not effeminate punks who could be pushed around, as Agron and Hernandez both had been upon other occasions. Since male homosexuals were the rumored victims of attacks in the playground, revenge for some earlier encounter could also have played a role in mobilizing their forces. The resort to violence was not the result of boredom or a random search for kicks but an ultimate test of masculinity and character, proof that they possessed heart and deserved to be counted among the warriors of the street. In a working-class world dislocated by economic change, reshaped by migration, and reorganized by public policy, the only thing an adolescent male could count on was heart.

Remaking New York

NEW YORK is the city of the future generation. Swathes of its inhabitants colonize old neighborhoods and spread, choking off the city's flourish anew. It is this that makes it a world-class city. However, the city's development, while concentrated in the hands of a few elites and investors, whose decisions are borne disproportionate weight, who are hidden in the "inner" boroughs disappear or are in other locations; their schools shrunken and underfunded; and their cultural and organizational forces

Four factors reshaped the postwar transformation of New York's street culture. Adolescents observed their parents in the labor market. Deprived of a trade or to take a firm to quit and return to the understanding of the market. The second factor was the second factor a had cut off the largest flow of