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# The Political and Emotional Economy of Violence in US Inner City Narcotics Markets

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“Bol<sup>1</sup> got kilt over nothin’ too. It was just the tension . . . The words got thick.”

Leo, in shackles in the Philadelphia County Jail visiting room

### Fieldnote Excerpt:

*Tito, with scratches on his face and splotchy red bruises on his neck, walks into the Philadelphia County Jail’s visiting room and smiles at us.*

*“Man, am I happy to see you guys. I just got in a fight with some black bol. Look! [raises his shirt to reveal a deep crimson circular bruise in the center of his chest] Motherfucker bit me!*

*“I wasn’t even that mad that he bit me. There’s no such thing as a fair fight when you’re locked up. We had words earlier at the phones, and he kept runnin’ his mouth but I let it go. I wanted to be peaceful—you know I have a lot on my mind, I have to go to court tomorrow—*

*“But the nigga came into my cell and [making a punching motion] snuck me in the back of the head. Then he stood there lookin’ at me like I wasn’t gonna’ do nothin’.”*

*But I guess cus I’m small and I’m Puerto Rican, and I came in here quiet, minding my business, people think they can fuck with you. That’s what I get for trying to keep to myself. People think you a pussy. I know if I came in here like a savage then he wouldn’t ‘a done that.*

*Now I might end up killing this nigga, cus when I get mad I don’t really know what I’m doing. And I get mad at any little thing. I just lose it; go into a rage.*

This fieldnote and transcript of a conversation was written by two of the co-authors (George and Fernando) after visiting Tito, a 19-year-old neighbor of ours, in the county jail. Addled by benzodiazepine and alcohol, Tito had killed his childhood best friend, Alex, as they were celebrating the three-month anniversary of successfully running a profitable heroin and cocaine sales corner in the segregated Puerto Rican sector of inner city Philadelphia. They had just split the cost of buying a used .357 Magnum to protect their corner from rivals and were posing with it taking selfies when Tito accidentally pulled the trigger.

Tito and Alex’s drug corner was located in the former 19th century industrial heartland of the city. Devastated by public and private sector abandonment, the neighborhood was riddled with empty factories, decaying row homes, vacant lots, defunct railroad lines and random piles of rubble and garbage. Open air narcotic markets have dominated this sprawling post-industrial landscape since at least the 1980s (Richards 1994). We conducted fieldwork as a team in the poorest, most densely Puerto Rican 300+-square-block section<sup>2</sup> of the neighborhood from the fall of 2007 through 2013 with periodic follow-up interviews and visits through 2018. Philippe rented an apartment on a block where he and Fernando had befriended several of the neighbors including the local drug boss. Fernando and George lived full-time in the apartment for almost four and a half years. Philippe lived part-time in the apartment and continued visiting the neighborhood through 2018. Laurie also visited regularly for the duration of the project. (For a further discussion of team ethnographic methods, see Bourgois [2011].)<sup>3</sup>

Drawing from several thousand pages of fieldwork notes and transcriptions of interviews, we are trying to make sense of the maelstrom of deadly violence engulfing young men at this retail endpoint of the global narcotics industry that originates in Colombia, passes primarily through Central America and the Caribbean, and wreaks violent devastation and addiction along its path (Bourgois 2015). The ethnographic material we present here offers a

close-up view of the dynamics of violent confrontations at three crucial institutional and political economic interfaces that generate violence: police raids, open air drug corners and jails/prisons.

Randall Collins, using a symbolic interactionist framework and drawing primarily from ethnographies of anonymous and semi-anonymous public settings, importantly observes that aggressive interactions typically, and perhaps counter-intuitively, defuse non-violently into what he calls “interaction ritual chains” of bluster and posturing that shy away from deadly force (Collins 2008; Collins 2016). In some cases, however, confrontations erupt into seemingly outrageously violent excesses that appear to be sociopathic—if not inhuman. Collins refers to these as “forward panics” and argues that they follow recognizable logics and patterns of emotional escalation (Collins 2009). This perspective highlights the emotional dynamic of a self-driving momentum that galvanizes violence. It humanizes perpetrators by suggesting that anyone in those settings, at those moments, might commit those same ostensibly incomprehensible brutal acts.

Violence is, in fact, however, distributed unequally across social contexts, and in our analysis of the state’s interface with inner city narcotics markets we find it useful to invoke a broader institutional and political-economic frame than is generally accessible through the symbolic interactionist lens. We are following, here, the work of Randol Contreras (Contreras 2013), whose ethnography of the extreme brutality of his own closest friends in the South Bronx as they became stick-up artists in the drug trade draws from Collins’ insights but sets them in the context of local and transnational history and political economy. We examine, in other words, how ritual interaction chains in the inner city become disproportionately subject to forward panics of deadly brutality because of public policy and socioeconomic conditions. Specifically, extreme eruptions of violence are imposed onto the logics of everyday sociability among ambitious, unemployed youth in the US inner city by: (1) racist practices of law enforcement; (2) the carceral mismanagement of unemployment and poverty; (3) dysfunctional gun control laws; and (4) narcotics profit margins that are artificially elevated by illegality (see Bourgois 2018; Bourgois and Hart 2016, 2018). The stakes are raised on the street by easy access to cheap automatic weapons, untraceable cash and intense competition for scarce resources.

## The Inner City Puerto Rican Colonial Diaspora

The contemporary US version of neoliberalism that has cut social service provision and increased corporate wealth and power (Harvey 2005) through

financial globalization, while massively expanding punitive institutions, sets the context for the contours of both interpersonal and structural violence in the deindustrialized US inner city (Bourgois 2003; Wacquant 2009). Since 1959, when Puerto Rican immigration to Philadelphia was at its height, the city lost almost all of its manufacturing jobs as well as roughly a third of its population (Adams 1991; Fairbanks 2009; Whalen 2001). By the mid-1980s the multibillion dollar global narcotics industry had filled the job vacuum in inner cities across the United States (Bourgois 2003). In Philadelphia, during the 2010s, Puerto Rican youth filled the entry level rungs of the flourishing retail distribution market. These unemployed second-generation Puerto Rican immigrants sold high quality, inexpensive narcotics to primarily white, indigent, addicted customers in the shadows of the factories that once employed their grandparents, as well as those of their local white customers.

The United States seized the island of Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898, claiming it as an “unincorporated overseas territory.” It has effectively remained a colony of the United States ever since. Although residents of the island have US citizenship and must obey federal laws and regulations, they cannot vote in US elections and their economy is subject to strict US federal oversight. Immediately following the 1898 military invasion, US multinationals commandeered Puerto Rico’s resources with the massive imposition of agro-export sugar plantations on its coastal plains. After World War II, US corporations piloted an early version of globalization, inventing the model of light industry export sweatshops that was soon to dominate the world economy and deindustrialize US rustbelt cities. Puerto Rico’s forcibly imposed exclusive reliance on an import/export economy with the US mainland devastated the conquered territory’s former agricultural and artisanal economy (Bonilla and Campos 1986; Dietz 2003). This unequal clash of “modes of production” represents a classic example of what Karl Marx ([1867] 1990: 872-942) called “primitive accumulation.” The political, military, and economic usurpation of Puerto Rico’s natural resources dispossessed the island’s primarily rural inhabitants and transformed the territory into a tariff free export platform exclusively for the use of US multinational corporations. Semi-subsistence sharecroppers were suddenly wrenched out of patrimonial haciendas in the highlands and forced to scramble for part-time seasonal wage-work first as sugarcane cutters and later as factory workers in growing shanty towns and urban housing projects. This formally colonized island, mis-identified officially as a “free-associated commonwealth,” generated some of the highest corporate profit rates in the western hemisphere during the second half of the 20th century. In 1990, for example, Puerto Rico’s Secretary of State proudly declared, “There is no single country in the world that produces as much net income for US companies

as Puerto Rico" (*Caribbean Business*, November 29, 1990, cited in Caban 1993: note 21; see also Bourgois 2003).

Puerto Rico's classically colonial subordination has irremediably skewed its internal domestic economy which has consequently been unable to employ, feed and house its population. More than half of the territory's residents have essentially been expelled from their homeland by hunger and unemployment to the US mainland since World War II. This ongoing disarticulation of Puerto Rico's colonial economy—including a prolonged recession that began in 2006 and climaxed with the Governor of Puerto Rico's 2016 *de facto* declaration of bankruptcy and the Federal imposition of congressional receivership oversight<sup>4</sup>—has ensured an unlimited supply of impoverished, unemployed legal new immigrants who are desperate enough to fill the highest-risk rungs of the retail-level labor force of the global narcotics industry throughout the Northeast United States.<sup>5</sup>

## The Carceral Infrastructure Promoting Interpersonal Brutality

To return to the micro-interactional context of the opening fieldnote: Tito's disconcerting ability to launch himself into a blind rage and viciously beat a fellow inmate inside his jail cell can be read as an example of what symbolic interactionist theory might call a "ritual interaction chain" that exploded into a "forward panic." The exceptional hand-to-hand, literally tooth-and-nail violence of the fight, however, needs to be placed in the political and infrastructural context of the overcrowding caused by US hyper-incarceration policies. Jails and prisons have *de facto* become institutional pressure cookers of extreme interpersonal brutality and racism. Tito is, as he says, "small and . . . Puerto Rican" in an African American-dominated overcrowded county jail, administered by often racist or hostile guards. It is imperative, consequently, for his survival and self-respect that he not be seen as weak. Tito is also smart. He had no problem identifying the infrastructural context for the violence that took hold of him and his fellow inmates, who, at the time, were all confined to punitive "lock-down" in the maximum-security unit of the Philadelphia County Jail awaiting trial. He was also terrified because he was facing an initial charge of 17 to 34 and a half years in prison:

**Tito:** This unit is crazy man. A lot of people don't know what's going on yet with their case. They stressin'. They have that uncertainty. They don't know if they are going to go home soon, or if they aren't ever

goin' home. Plus, in close custody, they got us on lock-down half the time because of some shanking. There ain't shit to do. You just sit in your cell all day bored and frustrated. That's half the reason there so many problems.

This insight, however, did not stop him from exploding into violence against the inmates locked up around him:

**Tito:** Out in the street I knew how to resolve a situation, you could talk to someone out there and maybe it didn't have to come to any violence. In here there ain't no choice.

We documented dozens of horrendous accounts of excessive brutality by other friends and neighbors in the carceral context. Their retrospective accounts of these violent events were often framed by idioms of masculine hypersexuality and racialized conflict. At the start of Tito's pretrial incarceration, we sought out Don Ricardo—a charismatic former drug corner boss who had survived a 15-year prison sentence for a road rage murder he had committed in his 20s and had reintegrated himself into the community. We were hoping to arrange a phone call from Don Ricardo to advise Tito to refrain from violence. George told Don Ricardo about Tito's multiple recent fights in jail. Don Ricardo, however, cut him short:

**Don Ricardo:** Naaahh! I don't see nothing wrong with what Tito did. He is going to have to fight a lot, especially in his weight class. But he will get his respect. You can't show that you fear nobody. The black people in the County, they try to take your heart—just like out here on the block [motioning with his chin in the direction of the park where the drug corner was controlled, exceptionally, by an African American rather than Puerto Rican drug boss]. But I'm not gonna mention no names.

Tito did right to fight. If he keeps fighting like that, trust me, he'll be alright. Tito will make a reputation. Tito gotta show that he don't care how little he is. That way he gonna get his respect one way or another. I'm not gonna tell you that he's gonna win all of his fights, but he's gonna get his respect and they gonna leave him alone.

It's not just Tito's problem. You could be skinny; you could be big; you could be any kind of size . . . They will try to fight you any which way. Take whatever you got. Try to overpower you. Try to bully you.

Number one bully at the F [CFCF]<sup>6</sup> are the Muslims. They think that you are going to convert when you get into jail and then you have to

pay them a tax of everything you get. But not me [arguing with an invisible Muslim], "I like pork! And I eat hog, motherfucker! I ain't becoming a Muslim. And I ain't giving you shit. And if you got a problem, [shouting] I'll fuck all of you up." [Waving his hand at an imaginary crowd of intimidating prisoners.]

If they mess with you, you gonna have to resolve the problem quick. You can't let it get outta hand, 'cause if it gets out of hand, then, you know, everybody's gonna start pickin' on you. You gotta resolve the problem, just like Tito did. You gotta react fast, or else they run all over you man.

They gonna call you Maytag.<sup>7</sup> You gonna be washing their underwear, dirty shitty underwear, and then you gonna be givin' that booty up. Can't let them bully you!

Most nefarious is the way a capacity for brutality becomes inculcated by the institutional carceral context into an enduring intimate subjectivity of masculinized and kin-scripted self-respect expressed in violently misogynous slang:

**Tito:** You can't just let them treat you like a bitch 'cause then it's over. Everyone is going to think, "Oh that nigga's a pussy, take his shit." And the other niggas that don't get money on their books be thinkin', "This nigga over here is about to go to the store. I'm'a take his shit.

They be sayin', "He a pussy he ain't going to do anything." Then they walk up in your cell, "Look nigga gimme all that or I'm'a fuck you up." And people give it to them! I done seen it too many times man.

No one is going to talk about me like that. All I have in here . . . [choking back tears] is my pride. I'm not letting anyone take that away from me! And my mama didn't raise no pussy.

In short, overcrowded US prisons effectively became gladiator training grounds of surprise attacks and assertions of domination and humiliation, obliging terrified young men to cultivate hyper-masculine reputations in public displays of brutality against one another. Prisons and jails also function as another institutional pressure cooker for organizing racialized prison gangs, like the "Muslims" in the Philadelphia County Jail, that offer mutual self-protection, sociability and access to material resources.

Another neighbor of ours, Papito, who had, in fact, left the narcotics economy to work legally as an unlicensed house painter, was incarcerated for beating up his sister's abusive husband and found himself in county jail

awaiting trial with a freshly broken arm from the fight to protect his sister. He explained:

**Papito:** The Muslims control everything in there. They saw me going to the commissary and told me [puffing up his chest aggressively], “We want some soup.”

I told them [aggressively], “You know what! We are going to have to kill one another right now.” I was locked up for 15 years in Puerto Rico and I know what it means to be in prison. I know what you have to do [raising his one good arm in the air holding an imaginary shank and hunching over the other broken arm in a disabled fencer’s stance]. “Let’s kill each other right now—Come on.”

But right at that moment, the guards brought in a new chain of prisoners and released their handcuffs. I heard one of them call out, “Are you Puerto Rican?” They were from Ponce, from right near my barrio.

They saw the Muslims. And the biggest one stood up in front of them [switching momentarily into broken English], “Get the fuck outta here.” He waved a pen in his left hand and pulled out a piece of metal [espiga]—like an ice pick.

And they were like [opening his eyes wide and switching to English again], “Ahh cool, it’s all cool man.” And just walked away.

There were 12 of us from Puerto Rico. All in the same cell. They called us “the 12 disciples.” The others, the blacks were “the Muslims.”

But after that they respected us. We all used to go out to the dining hall in single file and the Muslims would just watch us. My companions were all big and in the cell they would be doing exercises, but I couldn’t because of my arm. I was the mascot of the group so they would put me in the middle of the line when we walked around.

## The Charisma of “Bichotes” and Territorial Control of Narcotics Profits

The over-determined and powerful institutional effect of the overcrowded, racialized, gang-controlled carceral setting that propels routine confrontations into forward panics of extreme violence is relatively easy for everyone to recognize, even the participants. More subtle but equally pervasive, is the need to cultivate a long-term credible reputation by charismatically mobilizing expressive violence in daily interactions in order to have a chance at upward mobility in the narcotics industry. These confrontations take the

form of diversely scripted rituals of hyper masculine self-respect that become the basis for the consolidation of violent solidarity networks of “riders” (i.e. peer-group companions also referred to as “niggas/peoples/bols”) who are willing to fight on one’s behalf to avenge past violence or insult. Individuals cultivate these thick networks of reciprocal obligations for assistive violence to ensure that they are not themselves the brunt of violence; but, ironically, to have credibility a rider must periodically aggressively initiate public acts of violence over even minor insults. Furthermore, the depth of one’s network of rider relationships and one’s reputation for heroic violent acts within that network take on high economic stakes in the inevitable struggles that arise over exclusive control of hyper-profitable street corners in a cash-only narcotics industry that does not have the benefit of state legal sanctions for enforcing contracts and safeguarding cash (Karandinos et al. 2014; Bourgois 1989).

Building a reputation for having the capacity to explode into brutality and surrounding oneself with a social network of loyal violent rider minions ensure, therefore, the modicum of stability, peace, prompt payment of loans and commissions, and purity of product necessary to maintain the fluidity of business exchanges. On our block, for example, on a good day of sales, 100 bundles (each consisting of 14 \$10 packets of heroin, usually weighing 0.03 grams) were sold to mostly white outsider addicts by sundown. In other words, some \$14,000 worth of cash in untraceable ten-dollar bills would change hands without a single bill going missing every 8 to 14 hours on some of Philadelphia’s poorest street corners. There were practically no legal businesses providing any significant source of legal employment surrounding us, and almost half of the households were below the US Federal Poverty Level. In this vulnerable all-cash context, the brute violence of gunplay and fisticuffs becomes the foundation for territorial control of profitable narcotics markets. The escalation of displays of aggression into deadly gunplay is frequently dismissed self-critically by the often astounded perpetrators themselves as “nut-ass shit,” but they are, in fact, scripted rituals of masculine assertion and self-respect that are essential to establishing credibility and strategically positioning charismatic participants for upward mobility in the local retail narcotics trade.

An ambitious, entry level street seller aspires to become a “bichote,” the Spanglish term for the “owner” of a drug corner that evokes the double entendre of “large phallus” in Puerto Rican Spanglish and “big shot” in colloquial US slang. We documented more than a dozen bichote transitions during our five years of fieldwork. They were generally precipitated by the murder or arrest of the existing owner and were often followed by a volatile period of jockeying for control by multiple wannabe bichotes which sometimes lasted

for several weeks or even months. The violent reputation and depth of rider relationships that each wannabe bichote was capable of mobilizing often determined who survived. A bichote's longevity ultimately hinged on his—and on rare occasions her<sup>8</sup>—ability to be recognized as a respected “leader among equals.” The most resilient bichotes, however, did not rely on brute force alone. They sought to ensure their territorial control by interspersing acts of expressive brutality with displays of humility and charismatic generosity. They were also usually embedded in a panoply of local biological, agnatic and fictive kinship relations.

## Police Hostility on the Front Lines of the “War on Drugs”

We will present an extended excerpt from a fieldnote written by Philippe that describes overlapping incidents of potential violence that expose the abusive, volatile relationship of the police to the neighborhood. The ritual interaction chain—again to use Collins' term—began as a routine insult from the police that was escalated by the oppositional charisma of the bichote and was egged on by the crowd. The correlation of force was reversed by a show of police reinforcements that verged on exploding into a final forward panic of police brutality, but the solidarity of the crowd stopped the enraged (and terrified) police in their tracks.

### Fieldnote Excerpt:

*Raffy, the bichote, is out on the corner tonight and invites Tito and me to sit next to him on the stoop of an abandoned row home. Tito is Raffy's “case-worker,” the local term for a bichote's second-in-command who is responsible for managing the shifts of sellers and look-outs on a corner. We are surrounded by a half-dozen of his off- and on-duty heroin and cocaine sellers, wannabe sellers, and teenage and pre-teenage bored kids who are all eager—like me—to be around the big shot boss. When he shows up on the block, Raffy is always the nexus for action, money, power, potential and risk. He is also the only provider of local employment in this desolate neighborhood.*

*A police car cruises slowly down the block. We all tense up and avoid eye contact while simultaneously trying to appear bored and indifferent. As the patrol car nears, the passenger-side officer rolls down his window and yells out, “Betta get off the block right now Fatass!” Raffy jumps to his feet, muttering, “Dickhead!” His riposte—meant for our ears only—is, however, a little too loud. The officer jumps out of the car, flushes red and slaps his baton in*

his palm. "I heard that, *Fatass*. Get the fuck outta here right now! A bunch of people been telling me about you."<sup>9</sup> [Shouting] Go home Bitch!"

Raffy snaps his mouth shut, spins around and obediently starts walking towards the far corner. I hold my breath hoping the escalation will defuse, but after only a few steps, Raffy stops. A grin spreads across his face, and he slowly raises his fists above his head, pumping them in a boxer's victory salute. He is evoking the character of "Rocky Balboa," Philadelphia's beloved movie icon whose billion dollar series of eight blockbuster films spanning the 1970s through the late 2010s was set in this very same neighborhood as it transitioned from all-white to nearly all-Puerto Rican. The crowd of employees, wannabes and young admirers breaks into laughter and starts following Raffy as he continues to walk up the block. In slow motion now, he raises his fists above his head, pumping the Rocky-style salute in rhythm with each step.

Spittle flying from his mouth, the officer blushes a deeper red and belts out another slew of "*Fatasses*" and "*Bitches*." He reholsters his baton in an attempt to pump his fists to match Raffy's challenge, and sputters, between curses, "I'll fight you right now . . . Right now." Like Raffy the officer is extremely overweight, however, and his belly breaks through his uniform bursting over his holster-belt which is laden with pistol, tazer, baton, walkie-talkie and other bulky accessories. This makes him stumble forward and the crowd roars with more laughter. Someone starts chanting, "*Dickhead! Dickhead!*"

I notice that the caseworker Tito is hanging back at the edge of the scene, haranguing the youths in front of him, "*Yo stop! Shut-up. You don't know what you're doin'.*" He is clearly trying to deescalate the confrontation.

The driver of the patrol car has now jumped out as well and is loudly shouting for reinforcement into a walkie-talkie pinned to his left shoulder, making sure we can hear the potential disaster awaiting us. He glares out at the crowd palm-slapping his baton, but the chanters have turned their back on him to follow behind Raffy egging one another on in a parade of support. Trying to catch up, the irate officer struts down the middle of the street, fists still raised in a lame imitation of Raffy, but his taunts of "*Bitch*" and "*Fatass*" are drowned out by the crowd's chants of "*Dickheads*."

Raffy reaches the corner first and the crowd backs away to allow the two officers, batons raised, to approach, but then immediately re-closes in a circle around them with cell phones held out to video the scene. Raffy drops into a squat and goose-steps around the irate officer in a chicken dance, making clucking noises and flapping his elbows. He then stands up, and announces during a momentary awed silence of the crowd, "*Ok, officer, then meet me in the gym. We'll put on gloves . . . Not out here on the street like bitches.*"

Two patrol cars screech around the corner and four more officers jump out, definitively breaking the stalemate. The crowd closest to the patrol cars jumps back and the calmer partner of the irate wannabe Rocky officer takes advantage of the momentary lull to grab Raffy's left elbow, twisting it expertly behind his back. But Raffy obediently brings his other, still free, right arm behind his back to facilitate a smoother handcuffing of his wrists. Raffy then springs forward just in time to use the momentum of the officer's attempt to grab his handcuffed arms and dislocate his shoulder by yanking him off his feet to dive adroitly through the open back door of the patrol car. He ducks his head to avoid the doorframe, and crumples face first onto the back seat. He then manages to squirm upright in the seat and regains his composure. Playing to the crowd, he opens his mouth widely in what looks like a full-throated, full-belly laugh, but we cannot hear him because the officers have slammed the door shut.

The crowd's show of solidarity and the plethora of cell phones videoing have saved Raffy from the standard retaliatory scenarios of such confrontational arrests: a sprained handcuffed-wrist, a dislocated shoulder, a concussed head "accidentally" slammed on a police car's doorframe or roof, or just a routine police beat-down.

The irate officer is on a roll now. He spins around to sprint after Wiwi, a 16-year-old wheelchair-bound hustler who is making the mistake of trying to rush to his home around the corner. Wiwi has a sunset "curfew condition" imposed on him from an arrest earlier this week and the moon is already full in the dark sky. The officer grabs the right handle of Wiwi's wheelchair and drags him to the far side of his patrol car, which has been flung open by another officer. He tries to throw the disabled adolescent directly from his chair into the back seat next to Raffy, but Wiwi is wearing a seat belt and the entire chair lifts into the air. Both the officer and the disabled adolescent curfew violator fall backwards on the pavement to more of the crowd's laughs.

Several adult on-lookers have now raised their voices above the chorus of "Dickheads" to protest, "Nah nah, Officer! He ain't doin' nothin'. He just goin' home. The young bol lives right here." [Pointing to the far corner.] The cop yells back, "I got every right to arrest him! I caught him right here last week with bundles [14 packs of heroin] on him." Wiwi adds his cracking voice to the melee, "You got no right to arrest me in front of my own house." The officer laughs, "You cried like a little bitch in your cell last week. You gonna cry again now?" Wiwi has, indeed, burst into flowing tears of rage.

Wiwi's mother pushes through the crowd, asking in a surprisingly calm but loud voice, "What seems to be the problem officer?" Without pausing for a response she turns to Wiwi and raises her hand as if to slap him, but instead

yells in Spanish, "Callate hijo [shut-up son]." That appears to calm the officer down.

Wiwi, now sobbing, to his own mortification, undoes his seat belt and tries to throw himself from his chair directly into the back of the open patrol car door next to Raffy. He is shouting hoarsely, "Ok, Ok arrest me dickheads . . . My lawyer's gonna . . ." His arms are not strong enough, however, and his wheelchair tips over. His mother catches him just in time, jams him back behind his seat belt and rapidly wheels him home.

Two more patrol cars skid to a stop and the crowd retreats onto stoops and into houses. The police make no more arrests. Instead, they pack themselves back into their vehicles and screech off, in a stench of burnt rubber.

Tito, the young caseworker, has already started making multiple urgent phone calls to "re-up product." This is his break to rise in the food chain, especially if a district attorney prosecutor "throws the book" at Raffy. Sweating and barking out orders he announces, "We reopenin'." He could get lucky and manage to take over as bichote on this profitable block without having to pay rent.

Only minutes after the police have left, the usual stream of customers—most of them white—begins flowing by again, cash in hand. Many of the addicts look like the walking-war-wounded, or rather like emaciated Auschwitz survivors on the final death march, covered in scabs and rags. A young white man with a white blood-stained bandage wrapped around his forehead bargains with Tito to exchange a "9 millimeter glock [semi-automatic pistol]" for "a bundle [14 \$10 packets] of dope [heroin] and a bundle of powder [cocaine]."

During a lull in the selling, one of the hotter-headed "dickhead"-chanters, who is clearly jealous of Tito's move to take over the corner, brags, "We should'a beaten up the cops—they was drawlin' [acting inappropriately]." This prompts an almost formal responsible businessman's rebuke from Tito about the stupidity of having taunted the police, "Nah Nah! They gonna be on our ass now. Hittin' the block. It's gonna be hot. We won't even be able to smoke a blunt on this block no more."

The hothead ripostes, "Nah, they just angry at us 'cause we the outlaws and they can't be." Tito cracks-up laughing and slaps him a high five. A customer walks up and they go right back to business, selling, play-boxing and rolling blunts. Clouds of marijuana waft into the chill of the late autumn night air as dollars and dope pass rapidly from hand to hand.

On this particular night the drug sellers won the micro-interactional skirmish. The next day the judge dismissed the "assault" charges against Raffy. Ultimately, however, the criminal justice apparatus of mass incarceration

trumped the ongoing scramble for respect, power, and profits among our block's multiple wannabe bichotes.

## Jockeying for Power and Profits

Raffy's aggressive Rocky-style confrontation with the police described in the long fieldnote occurred during the beginning months of our project, and it took us several years to more fully comprehend the socio-cultural logics for the roller coaster of emotional energy that almost erupted into forward panics of physical violence before defusing just in time. Ultimately, however, the humiliation of the police unleashed a much higher and more brutal stakes of "structural institutional violence" in the form of exceptionally long and punitive prison sentences for both Raffy and Tito. Eighteen months after the confrontation, Raffy was serving a 12- to 24-year sentence for having violated his probation on an outstanding 2- to 4-year narcotics conviction compounded by two more narcotics sales arrests the following week. Immediately after the judge dismissed the bogus police assault charges against him, Raffy had rushed back to the corner and had continued to hang out conspicuously while Tito administered sales. The humiliated police were only too eager to catch him, and a draconian judge obliged them by punitively maximizing the stacking of allowable multiple prison sentences rather than running them concurrently as usually happens on parole violations for non-violent crimes in Philadelphia. Worse yet, according to Raffy's wife, Raffy was being held in solitary confinement for repeatedly bursting into rage against guards and other inmates in the overcrowded western Pennsylvania rural prison where he had been confined against the entreaties of his public defender, who had advocated for a closer facility to enable visiting by his wife and children. Tito, for his part, was by then facing charges of 17 to 34 and a half years for the killing described in the opening fieldnote. By bad luck, Tito's prosecutor was a notorious hard-liner who chose to ignore the fact that everyone—even the arresting officers—knew the killing had been an accident, qualifying for a three times shorter involuntary man-slaughter charge of 2 and a half to 5 years.

The disproportionately severe prison sentences had, of course, no effect on the continuing pace of narcotics sales on the block. The block was generating \$5,000 weekly rent for its new drug don, "Panama Red." At the time, what most baffled us was why Raffy had dared to mock the irate officer and why he persisted on returning to the block after the judge released him on the bogus assault charges despite the obvious risk of police revenge.

Seasoned bichotes usually avoid spending time at their drug sales corners to reduce their exposure to police attention or attacks by rivals. It was not until we understood how tenuous the power of bichotes can be and the strategic need for them to cultivate public legitimacy among neighborhood residents for their exclusive control of their territories that we began to understand the stakes propelling Raffy's charismatic oppositionality to the police and his subsequent risky public bravado. This required understanding the problematic and prolonged history of violent bichote struggles for control of our block (see Figure 2.1).

When Raffy was initially arrested for disrespecting the officer, our block was already under siege by at least three wannabe bichotes, all of whom commanded significant firepower and personal credibility. Raffy had only just decided to attempt to seize solo control of sales. For the past few months he had been in partnership with another neighbor, Lucas. They had taken advantage of a power vacuum caused by the killing of a previous, long-term, stable bichote who everyone referred to as "the Dominican bol." The Dominican bichote, however, had been paying \$5000 per week rent to an even more powerful former bichote, Panama Red who was in prison on an unrelated drug

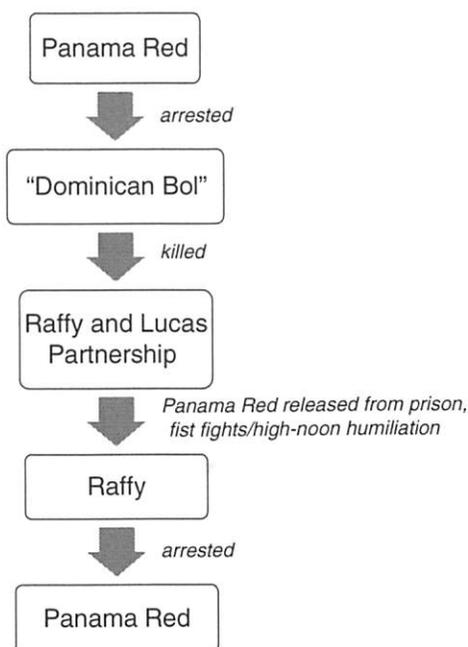


Figure 2.1 Bichote Genealogy

charge and was scheduled for imminent release. Tito, as Raffy's ambitious secondhand man, had been acutely attuned to the opportunities offered by the volatility of the situation. Indeed, the reason he so enthusiastically and riskily reopened the block to sales when Raffy was arrested was because he too was angling for potential future control of the block. In fact, in the excitement of having temporarily taken over sales for his former boss, Tito had tried to explain to Philippe the complex genealogy of conflicting bichote successions on the block:

**Tito:** The Dominican bol got kilt one day in front of everybody in a bar over nothing, and Panama Red was still locked up at the time so the block was just landscape. Raffy and Lucas just started putting they own work [drugs] out here. It was Raffy with the dope [heroin] and Lucas with the powder [coke]. They didn't even have to take the block from nobody. They ain't payin' no rent to Panama 'cause he's locked up. They was just there, like, "I'm top of the chain of command now, because I got the work, so y'all hustlin' for me."

But then Panama Red came out [of prison] and he's tryin' to move in now. He's askin' for rent. I mean, Panama Red likes to play with guns and all—everybody knows that—but Raffy beat him down.

An elderly woman named Jomayra who sold *pastelillos* (a Puerto Rican deep fat fried pastry) to the drug sellers overheard Tito and joined the conversation in Spanish. She was eager to gossip and eager to assert her public support for Raffy's old-school masculinity and to condemn Panama Red's proclivity for gun violence.

**Jomayra:** Raffy gave Panama Red such a beating that day! You should've been here, professor! *Lo metió bajo el truck* [He knocked him right under his own truck]. That Panamanian doesn't fight [with his fists]. All he does is call his lackeys for help, "Come, bring me my pistol!" And then he becomes the devil, killing everyone. Because he can just grab you and kill you and then go home as if it was nothing. That's what he does. He doesn't [fist] fight. But that day, Raffy gave him his beat-down [*le dieron la pela*].

Like Jomayra, many of the neighbors on the block paid close, even anxious, attention to the violent jockeying of the three wannabe bichotes—Raffy, Lucas, Panama Red. They feared the collateral damage of a shootout. A few of the grandmothers guardedly even threatened to snitch on one or another of the pretenders. The pros and cons of each potential bichote was often a

subject of hushed conversation, spontaneous gossip and debate. Panama Red was renowned for “liking to play with guns.” He had also fathered a baby with a popular young woman on the block. In other words, he combined the fear of firepower with local kinship legitimacy as a high-status “baby daddy.” Raffy had grown up on the block, and was generally respected and popular. Lucas also had some neighborly legitimacy as a long-term married resident who was raising two toddlers but he suffered from alcoholism, occasionally binged on cocaine, and fought with his wife in public.

Over the next few months, the block spiraled into a three-way conflict. Although Tito, by this time, had already strategically moved on to pursue his *bichote* dreams partnering with his late-friend, Alex, he still felt loyalty as a rider with moral economy obligations to fight on the side of his friends on the block. He therefore became directly embroiled in its ongoing violent triangle of overlapping confrontations for control. Panama Red prevailed—initially through a strategic divide-and-conquer ploy that delegitimized Lucas, and ultimately, opportunistically, through the luck of the carceral fiat which trumped Raffy’s charismatic popularity and raw courage.

**Tito:** Raffy saw that Lucas, the bol with the powder [cocaine], didn’t back him up when he fought Panama Red. So Raffy said, “Fuck this, Lucas ain’t riding, so I’m takin’ the powder from him.” You know, like put his own product out there. ‘Cause Raffy didn’t really have no respect for Lucas at that point. So beef started bubbling up between all of them.

**Philippe:** [Confused] Who?

**Tito:** Raffy, Lucas and Panama Red. That’s when I started renting here. [Smiling] You could say I’m goin’ up the food chain.

See, Lucas’ bols came back and started taking the dope [heroin] off of Raffy’s sellers and repackaging it as Lucas’ shit. And that’s when Lucas hit my bol Bito with a golf club, ‘cause Bito was hustlin’ at that time for Panama Red. So Bito came and got me and I came back and beat Lucas the fuck up. I wasn’t even hustling for Panama Red or Raffy, but I was riding for my nigga Bito.

So some time later Lucas had gotten powdered up [high on cocaine] and he came out the house and came at Raffy with his AK [Kalashnikov assault rifle]. At first he had it pointed to the side and Raffy was like, “Yo nigga don’t point that shit at me.” And then Lucas, I guess he had some courage from all that powder [cocaine] so he pointed the jawn [AK]<sup>10</sup> at Raffy, and nigga was dancin’ [jumping from foot to foot]. Like, “Oh shit!” duckin’ around, scared as hell, ready to dive

[rocking his body, waving his arms out and opening his eyes wide, in a feigned adrenaline rush].

But instead of shooting, Lucas just went right back into his house and hid up on his roof. I went and grabbed my gun, and so did Bito. So it was me, Raffy and Bito waiting for Lucas up the block, ready to put that shit full of holes.

Lucas came back out and saw us waiting at the corner but he went right back in the house and didn't come out for days. But by then it was too late; Raffy got locked up and Panama Red had this block poppin' [selling full blast] with the fire dope [good quality heroin]. [Spitting in disgust] That nigga Lucas don't have no heart.

## Teenagers Trapped in the Narcotics Retail Trade

In a predictable sequence of events, Tito's little brother, Leo, immediately took over the block vacated by the arrest of his brother for killing Alex; and four months later we interviewed Leo in jail, where he was awaiting trial for shooting one of his workers who had stolen his stash of heroin. His description of that event portrays a classic interaction ritual chain of expressive aggression and posturing that devolved into an almost fatal forward panic by the high stakes of the narcotics industry and its easy access to automatic weapons. He was honestly befuddled at how he could have so stupidly shot his disrespectful worker when all he had meant to do was intimidate him into returning his \$500 stash of stolen heroin. In the heat of the confrontation, he found himself being bullied, threatened and disrespected to the point of no return.

**Leo:** Oh man, I got into some dumb ass shit. Real stupid! It was all over some nut shit. It wasn't even supposed to happen like that. I was gonna smack the shit out of him with the gun, but he kept talking. I wasn't even gonna shoot him, but it just happened too fast, man. I don't know, this the dumbest thing I ever did in my life.

I was rentin' the block and I had this young bol, Adrian, out there hustling for me. I went around the corner to advertise my stamp [shout out to passersby his brand of heroin]. And when I go back, the work [stash of heroin] ain't there, so I'm like, "Adrian, damn, you're the only person sittin' here, like, what's up? Where the work go?"

[Imitating ostentatious innocence] "Oh, I didn't touch your work" . . . this-an'-that. Then he wanted to get all hype, so he called his peoples:

Bobo, Bambam, Nini . . . all of his cousins. So I go back to my crib and I grab the strap [gun] and I come back.

[Putting his head into his hands, his voice cracking intermittently] I don't know, everything was just moving so fast, like. I ain't really know what the fuck to do. I was gonna smack the shit out of him. But he kept talking, and he had called his peoples and this-an'-that. I raised my hand at him [cocking his right shoulder in his shackles to approximate the motion of delivering a backhanded pistol whipping] and he dipped back . . . This shit is all nutty.

And his peoples, Bobo and all them, was sitting there [making a threatening face and crossing his arms]. I was thinkin' in my head, like, "Damn, if one of his peoples got a gun . . ." And Adrian like [tauntingly], "'Cause you ain't gonna be treating me like a nut" . . . and this-an'-that . . . "You a nut-ass nigga."

And I'm like [startled], "What?" And I'm trying to explain to Bambam and them, but Adrian's just like [arrogantly], "If you want to do something, do something."

So I pulled the jawn out [pointing his finger as well as he can in the shackles to illustrate an imaginary gun]. And he's like, "Nigga you not gonna do shit," and he came at me.

[Recomposing himself into a flat affect and shrugging] So I shot him once so he could get away from me. That was the first time I ever shot somebody. And I thought I was gonna be like hesitant. But I didn't even hesitate. It was just like a spur of the moment thing.

Afterwards, from my crib I had called Bobo and told him, "Look, when Adrian get better, we could rumble [fist fight]."

But Bobo told me Adrian was like almost dying in the hospital 'cause the bullet almost hit his main artery. I'm thinking in my head, like, damn, I didn't want all that to happen.

In the back of my head I'm like, "Damn, I just did some dumb shit!" And, next thing I know, they [the police] just come running up in my crib; they had my picture and they was [barking], "Where the gun at?"

Rippin' the house apart, lookin' for the gun.

Six months later Leo was awaiting transfer to a western Pennsylvania prison having received a 5- to 10-year sentence. As an 18-year-old who had climbed too fast into bichote status, he was terrified that he would cycle through prison for the rest of his life. Reflecting on that possibility, he uses the term "chain reaction," but, unlike symbolic interactionist theory, his explanation focuses on the material, economic, as well as social interactional risk

environment of the inner city narcotics markets in which he was such a precocious overachiever. Caught in the double bind of both structural and interactional no-exit vacuums, ambitious youth like Tito and Leo have a chillingly clear assessment of the inevitability of violence. As Leo explains:

So it's like a chain reaction. You come home [from prison] and you go back right to the same thing. This lifestyle is just so addictive. Every little thing about it—especially when you got a corner. You just wake up and you got money. You walk around the block and your workers passin' you some money. Next thing you know [cocking his neck as if cradling a cell phone], “Yo, I'm done, come pick this money up.” It's so easy. But it don't lead nowhere. Next thing you know you wind up killin' somebody 'cause he tried to kill you and you in this situation [shaking his shackles] ready to do more time. That's why I know I ain't gonna change if I come back to Philly.

Philly is like the fuckin' devil. I need to figure out a game plan to keep me away from the streets. I need to have a job before I get out of here. And I don't know how that's goin' to work. I ain't never had no job before.

I just don't want to go back to the same nut shit when I get home. There's old-ass people in here with white hairs. And them niggas ain't changed. You really gotta be strong to change. And I ain't gonna hold [lie to] you, I'm kinda weak in my mind. I get sucked into doing dumb stuff.

## Automatic Weapons in the Concrete Killing Fields

On an earlier jail visit, Leo had, to our surprise, also expressed ambivalent relief about having been incarcerated just in time, he said, to save his life. He blurted out a dizzying array of multiple overlapping “on-sight” conflicts among his closest-knit peer group of late-teenage, early 20s wannabe bichotes in which he had become directly, although inadvertently, embroiled. The “on-sight” challenge is a ritual of prospective aggression that has the potential to defuse deadly violence. It is a classic demonstration of Collins' (2008) insight that violence occurs comparatively rarely because it is “hard” to perform and requires skill, charisma and both emotional and strategic expertise (see also Contreras 2018). Being “on-sight” involves calling up one's enemy to announce one's intention to kill the person on sight: “Yo motherfucker! We on-sight!” This open declaration of intent to shoot generally has the practical effect of keeping the two on-sight nemeses away from one another, thereby enabling

them to postpone a murderous encounter long enough for “beef [conflict]” to dissipate over time or be settled through third-party negotiation. Ironically, like the structural violence of hyper-incarceration, the on-sight conflict does not disrupt the narcotics trade, because it reinforces rather than destabilizes the demarcation of rigidly bounded drug corners. The dense sociality of violence in the neighborhood is embedded in lifelines of childhood camaraderie and reciprocity obligations that flip-flop from heroic, selfless solidarity to instantaneous murder because post-adolescent male networks on inner city streets are flooded by easy access to unlicensed, inexpensive automatic weapons.

Leo almost desperately bombarded us with narratives of murder generated, it seemed at first sight, by idiotic, serendipitous contingencies and fleetingly unstable or immature personality conflicts, but which turned out in practice to be driven by logics of a dense sociality produced by extreme spatial, ethnic and class segregation. These young men are terrified into maintaining fearless, deadly reputations in often ill-coordinated jockeying for momentary control over profitable corners. Each shooting traps a wider net of sociable young men into obligations of solidaristic rider violence to support their wounded or threatened friend or boss, or their own public outrage over a display of disrespect (Karandinos et al. 2014).

Leo began with an account of a \$50,000 contract that Gordo, a big time supplier, had put on his head when “a couple of kilos of coke came up missing” shortly after a visit by Leo a week before his arrest. We had already heard the details of this threat from Leo’s mother, who had attempted to negotiate a cease-fire with Gordo’s mother. She had dared to approach Gordo’s mother because Gordo had been the boyfriend of one of her best childhood girlfriends:

**Leo:** [Earnestly] But Gordo’s not my only problem. If I wasn’t in this predicament [locked up waiting for trial] I probably would’ve got killed, not even knowing that they was looking for me to kill me.

See, my bols Izzi and Dito came to the block in the Crown Vic [car] and Dito jumped out, “Yo, let me get the gun, let me get the gun.” Wiwi give him the gun, and Dito jump back into the car.

Twenty minutes later all you hear is bam, bam, bam, bam. And then Dito came back around. He chillin’, “Yeah, I just shot bitch-ass Lolo, because he wanna be smacking my baby mom and shit. Fuck that nigga, dadadada. I hit [shot] him all in his dick. I hope that nigga die.”

I’m like thinking, “Damn! You a vicious bol Dito. You crazy!”

Lolo didn’t die and he didn’t tell on Dito, but Dito’s upstate [serving a long-term prison sentence] anyhow right now for shooting some

other bol. He just walked in that bol's garage and shot him in front of everybody.

[Shaking his head] Dito, he look innocent as a motherfucker. He got hazel eyes, but he got the devil in him, for real. That nigga do not look dangerous but that nigga is no joke. He don't play at all. Dito shot Lolo six times—all in his dick and his stomach. Lolo tells me every time he get an erection it hurts.

And Izzi too, that bol always be smilin'. He got big-ass teeth, just a funny lookin' goofy-ass nigga. But he one of the niggas that don't play either. He took his own man out on Somerset with a .357 [Magnum], and it wasn't over no bread [money]; it was over some beef [conflict], "Oh, you tried to holler at [flirt with] my girl." Bol got kilt over nothin'. It was just the tension . . . The words got thick.

Then the next day they was walking and Izzi played cool with his bol and pulled back, and let his bol walk ahead of him. It was raining, and Izzi just pulled the ratchet [gun] out and shot him twice in the head. Then he called his man [friend], "Yo, come pick me up; I'm walking down 2nd street." Jumped right in the truck and rolled out. Now the bol is doin' life upstate.

When Lolo recovered from being shot six times by Dito, he came after Leo. Luckily, however, another one of Lolo's friends named Momo called Leo to declare their "on-sight" status, thereby opening up the space for an immediate dialogue over the phone and nipping in the bud Leo's unsuspecting impending murder over nonsensical false impressions:

Leo re-enacted the cell phone conversation that saved his life:

[Imitating a gruff voice] "Why you lookin' to kill Chino?"

I'm like, "What you mean? What's up with that nut-ass shit?" [Looking away from his imaginary cell phone back at us] I didn't know nothin' about Chino!

[Gruffly again] "Oh, then, why you runnin' around with a nigga that lookin' for me?"

I told him, "With who? I didn't know this nigga Wiwi was looking for you or for your mans. That ain't got shit to do with me."

Both youths were telling the truth. Leo had simply been cruising in Wiwi's new car with gold-trimmed rims to pass the time of day. He had been bored and had forgotten that Wiwi had lent Dito the "ratchet" used to shoot Lolo "in the nuts." He had also forgotten that Chino and Momo were "Lolo's

mens” and that it would be natural for Wiwi to preventatively try to kill Lolo’s friends, lest they retaliate against him for having lent the gun that shot their friend Lolo.

**Leo:** So I’m like [speaking into an imaginary cell phone], “Momo just come to my crib and don’t bring your strap. Ain’t nothin’ gonna happen. You say, ‘What’s up’ to my moms. You chill in my crib. I’m cool with you. Because we gonna be neutral and y’all gonna be beefin’ together but without me.”

[In an exasperated tone] “I mean I didn’t know y’all niggas was goin’ through shit. Y’all don’t communicate. Next time, let a nigga know somethin’ before I get shot for no reason!”

So Momo was like, “Alright.” But he told me, “Chino looking for you to kill you. And Lolo looking for you to kill you. And I’m just keepin’ it real; I was sliding through your block every day ’cause I was tryna check you out too.”

After recounting this almost self-reflexive account of the deadly “nut-ass” shenanigans of his close friends, Leo revealed that he too was still hopelessly trapped in the logics of post-adolescent violent sociality. He recounted with mirth how the original “beef” that unleashed this string of on-sight nemeses began when Chino, like him, had gone cruising unsuspectingly in Wiwi’s brand new fancy car out of boredom, only to find himself in the midst of another completely unrelated shootout in a New York City lower east side housing project where Wiwi had gone to “pick up a brick [kilo].” The deal had gone bad, and Wiwi had sped away in his fancy car under a hail of bullets:

**Leo:** He just left Chino rotting up there. Nigga had to come back to Philly on the bus by himself. What type of nut-ass shit is that?

During this conversation, George and Fernando sat back in the uncomfortable plastic chairs of the jail’s visiting room not quite knowing how to respond. They were exhausted from trying to keep track of the nicknames of Leo’s overlapping friends and enemies. These hyper sociable murderers and wannabe murderers still carried their mothers’ and grandmothers’ affectionate nicknames. Leo, however, had only just begun his confessional self-critique, and he poured out two even more horrific stories in which once again he found himself unacceptably in the middle. Old friends had suddenly turned into on-sight nemeses.

The primary lesson Leo drew from the kaleidoscope of internecine murders and shootings engulfing his precocious, barely post-adolescent peer group—including his own multiple close shaves with “bein’ kilt over nothin’”—was to invest in more firepower:

**Leo:** I don’t wanna be caught slippin’. You can’t let people think you sweet [weak]. That’s why I carry my gun on me all day.

In fact, the week before he shot his worker for hiding his heroin stash, Leo had proactively been staking out “my old bol, Gordo, who put \$50,000 on me and \$50,000 on my brother.”

**Leo:** I used to go to his girl’s crib every night, strapped up, ready to kill him. But he never showed up. I kept it on the tip [secret]. I wanted him to think I didn’t know, ’cause if he know I know, he gonna be more of a fuckin’ Jedi about killin’ me and my brother first.

George strategically shifted the conversation by asking where Leo had obtained this last gun, and opened the Pandora’s box of gun fetishism among inner city adolescents whose social networks are flooded with cheap, unlicensed automatic weapons. Throughout the world, guns flow along the same market chains as narcotics (Nordstrom 2000), and in the US inner city they become particularly cheap and plentiful because they drop in value after being used in a shooting:

**Leo:** I bought it off one of my homies. It was a big-ass chrome 40 [.40 millimeter hand gun]. I put \$300 and my bol Fredo put \$300. We was sharin’ it. It was real cheap ’cause somebody probably already done did something with it.

I used to go in my backyard shooting that 40 all the time [smiling at the memory]. POWPOWPOWPOW!

I’m a gun freak; I love them too much. Before this one, I had this shotgun that this bol had tossed on Allegheny Street when he was runnin’ from the cops.

The handle had all this tape on it and every time you shoot it, BOOM! The whole gun fall apart [laughing].

I used to shoot it at the [abandoned] factory from my backyard when my mom was at work. I’d shoot right at the wall. You see the smoke comin’ off the wall and all the rocks breakin’.

Nobody knew where the shots come from. [Smiling] Next thing you know, I come out of my crib walkin', cheesin', like all the neighbors lookin' around, "You heard that?" [laughs]

Later I sold it to Denzel for like \$80.

**George:** How do you get so many guns so easily?

**Leo:** I don't know. They just come to me. Like [imitating a sales pitch], "Yo, I got a shotgun \$100. Real cheap! [Voice filling with energy] A 9 [mm] . . . a 40."

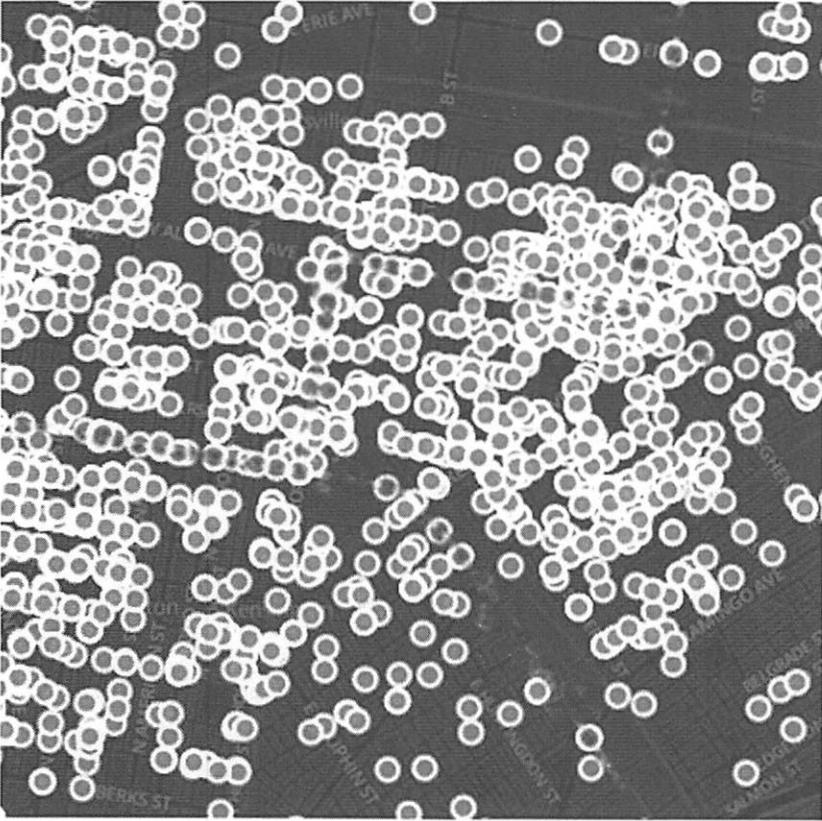
And, I'm like [eyes lighting up], "I need that!"

**George:** You like guns too much.

**Leo:** [Nodding his head in agreement] I don't know why. I got to leave them alone . . . I had so many guns in the house, I'm surprised that my mom didn't just get rid of me [tears welling up and putting his head in his hands].

## Conclusion: The Structural Forces That Make Deadly Violence Too Easy

Collins is probably right in provocatively insisting that violence is hard to perform most of the time. In the vast majority of cases, such confrontations ritually defuse into performative bombast and outrage. We are arguing, however, that in the US inner city, segregated by race and class, overlapping political and economic structural links—e.g. police brutality, mass incarceration, unemployment, narcotics markets, accessibility of guns—whiplash confrontational interactions into forward panics that ultimately result at the national level in the disproportional rates of firearm violence and hyper-incarceration among poor African American and Latino youth (Wacquant 2009). Epidemiologically, this pattern is quite dramatic and clearly documented. African Americans have a six times higher chance—and Latinos a two and a half times higher chance—of being murdered than whites. In the vast majority of the cases, the victim is of the same ethnicity as the perpetrator and is an acquaintance (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2014). Quantitative studies that measure the spatial concentration of violence in poor, segregated urban neighborhoods consistently present striking statistics, as do the per capita murder rates for Philadelphia disaggregated by neighborhood (Karandinos et al. 2014). Internationally, the epidemiological patterns documenting distinct rates of gun violence follow even more dramatic context-based patterns, with several of the Central American nations located along the narcotics smuggling routes



Map 2.1 Fatal Shootings and Stabbings in the Micro-Neighborhood, 2003–2013

Source: philly.com

heading to the United States (Honduras, El Salvador, Belize, Guatemala) logging the highest—or among the highest—murder rates in the world. In a perfect storm of structural factors, the island of Puerto Rico's murder rate is six times higher than the US mainland's average (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODOC) 2014; Bourgois 2015).

Our ethnographically based analysis identifies specific political-economic, policy-driven forces that short-circuit the potential for the deflation of aggressive confrontations and instead propel deadly outcomes. These forces, imposed by the state, have generated an extraordinary burden of firearm injury, interpersonal violence, addiction, mental and physical health disability and incarceration among the urban poor (Contreras 2013). Most obvious is the ubiquity of automatic weapons available on inner city streets. They

are not only easily available but are sold at well below market rate—often even below their cost of production, as documented in our fieldnotes and interviews. Equally obvious and linear are the institutional effects of punitive, overcrowded carceral facilities where violence becomes a necessity for survival as well as self-respect. More complex, but not much less linear, is the struggle for exclusive control of narcotics cash profits that are artificially elevated by their illegality. Competitors cannot call upon state institutions to enforce contracts and resolve disputes peacefully. The competition for exclusive control of these profits and the scramble for upward mobility within the entry level labor force at this illegal retail distribution endpoint of the global narcotics industry exacerbate the need for expressively engaging in violence. The stakes are raised by the desperation of an oversupply of competitors who are shut out of the legal labor market and have few alternative sources of income generation because of the economic devastation of the inner city and the dramatic cutbacks in federal and most state subsidies for the poor in the United States since the 1980s.

More subtle are the effects of the zero-tolerance-to-drugs law enforcement priorities that fight a “war on drugs” focused on addicts and low level street sellers in the inner city and fail to protect the physical security of local residents (Bourgois and Hart 2016; Auyero and Berti 2015; Goldstein 2004). This is exacerbated by the demoralized incompetence and routinized malfeasance of the narcotics teams that often take the form of racial profiling or planting false evidence to meet arrest quotas and minimize time spent on the harder work of community-patrolling and criminal-investigations that follow due legal process and detective-work. The practical result is a lack of cooperation with police investigations by residents not involved in the drug trade (see Desmond, Papachristos and Kirk 2016) and a reliance on retributive vigilante violence by victims, along with investment in hyper sociable youth networks of “rider relationships” (Karandinos et al. 2014). Ironically, the *bichotes* who successfully monopolize territory by combining brute force and “virtuous”<sup>11</sup> (clientelist and vigilante) power emerge at the micro block level as the most credible brokers sought out by neighbors to control the deadly collateral fallout of narcotics violence (Bourgois and Hart 2016). In other words, sociability, generosity and charismatic ambition become the proximal conduits for violence and also determine one’s location in the hierarchy of the narcotics retail trade. Hence Tito, out of his friendship “for my nigga Bito,” beat up Lucas and subsequently joined an ambush to shoot Lucas that defused in a ritual humiliation of Lucas. In the final analysis, however, in the confrontations for position and prestige within the only equal opportunity industry operating in the inner city, the interactional mechanisms for the deflation of

violence collapse under both the high economic stakes and the logistical ease of deadly force enabled by automatic weapons. Hence, the genuine befuddlement of Tito's little brother, Leo, in county jail, "It wasn't even supposed to happen like that . . . I wasn't even gonna shoot him, but it just happened too fast . . . This the dumbest thing I ever did in my life."

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## Notes

- 1 "Bol" is inner city Philadelphia slang for young man and can be more or less used interchangeably by Puerto Ricans and African Americans in inner-city Philadelphia with the term "nigga" or, when referencing a friend or ally, "rider" or "people."
- 2 We provide only an approximate measure for the number of square blocks comprising Philadelphia's micro-neighborhood of open air narcotics markets because Philadelphia city blocks vary in size, with small blocks inconsistently interspersed between longer, more standard-sized, 400-to-500-foot-long blocks. Furthermore, the more precise social boundaries of these micro-neighborhoods track along multiple types of urban infrastructures, such as railroad tracks, highways, elevated train lines, bus routes, parks and public-use buildings (Branas et al. 2018). The contours also morph flexibly in response to police raids and the rise and fall of the gentrification patterns occurring on the periphery of the neighborhood by the late 2010s. For our estimate, we defined a block as 2.34 acres.
- 3 As residents on the block or regular visitors, we were able to take part more fully in the social world of the drug sellers and their families. Philippe gave copies of two of his previous ethnographies (Bourgois 2013; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009) to neighbors, including the drug sellers. Local residents, including the drug bosses, understood that we were hoping to write a book about everyday life in the neighborhood with a focus on the drug scene. During our fieldwork years, most of the customers were poor white addicts from outside the neighborhood, so initially the white members of our team (Philippe, Laurie and George) were assumed to be addicts in search of heroin or cocaine. Soon, however, most of the street sellers reassured themselves that we were neither addicts nor undercover law officers. Most responded to our overtures with curiosity and gave generously of their time and friendship. Indeed, despite the

violent reputation of the neighborhood, most of the time it was exceptionally friendly and welcoming. High levels of unemployment and poverty translate into an exceptional level of public sociality, much of it conducted out on the sidewalk because of cramped housing conditions. People invest in developing warm social relations. They often approached us to find out more about our project and spontaneously offered their perspective and help. Several of the drug bosses took us into their confidence and spoke openly and in detail about their engagement with drug selling and violence. Many neighbors and drug sellers took pleasure in being recorded and encouraged us to observe their daily activities. They appreciated that their lives, perspectives and struggle to make money and survive were being documented and taken seriously.

We often worked together as a team co-authoring fieldnotes. Each of us, however, also developed independent relations with specific individuals and categories of people and between a third to half of our notes and interviews were solo-authored. Our diversity of ages, genders, ethnicities and personalities exposed us to a greater range of relationships and perspectives, allowing us to compare accounts of events and interpretations of dynamics. As young men, George and Fernando were welcomed into youth networks as peers. As a Latino from Costa Rica, Fernando developed especially close relations with new Spanish-speaking immigrants from Puerto Rico and was adopted as a fictive uncle by children in one family. As the youngest member of the team and a part-time student, George developed particularly close and nonhierarchical relations with young men that sometimes extended to quasi-filial relations with some of their mothers. As a married older couple with young adult sons, Philippe and Laurie were able to engage with parents and grandparents struggling to deal with parenting children on the block. Their age-graded status often generated more impression management, but also enabled access to retrospective life stories and increased access to the drug bosses. Philippe was generally referred to as “the professor” by most residents and was often jokingly referred to as “our boss” by George and Fernando, prompting access to recorded interviews with several of the drug bosses who cultivated similar friendly, joking relationships with their teams of sellers and drug corner managers.

- 4 Puerto Rico’s colonial domination came into stark relief in July 2016 when the US Congress forbade the governor of Puerto Rico from declaring bankruptcy and imposed a seven member “Control Board” (referred to as “the junta” in Puerto Rico) with the power to dictate draconian measures of economic austerity to facilitate financial debt payments to US multinational corporations, including, most outrageously, hedge and vulture funds (Walsh 2016: B1). At the time, the *Wall Street Journal* highlighted the taboo secret of Puerto Rico’s formal official colonial status without daring to use the word “colonialism” by outlining the absurdity of the island’s financial Catch-22: “Puerto Rico’s public agencies can’t seek protection in federal bankruptcy court to shed debts because the island, a commonwealth of the US, isn’t a state, and it can’t seek aid from the International Monetary Fund because it isn’t an independent country” (Timiraos and Peterson 2016).
- 5 In a collaborative analysis with epidemiologists and demographers, our ethnographic team demonstrated quantitatively the structural generalizability of what we have documented ethnographically: the retail narcotics market’s privileged relationship to the Puerto Rican diaspora’s colonized vulnerability in northeastern US inner cities. During the 1990s through the 2000s there existed a statistically significant correlation between the purity of the heroin available in northeastern US rust-belt cities and the index of poverty and segregation of their Puerto Rican neighborhoods (Rosenblum et al. 2014; see also Mars et al. 2014; Karandinos et al. 2014).
- 6 CFCF is the abbreviation for the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, the formal name for the Philadelphia County Jail, and “the F” is its local nickname.

- 7 Randol Contreras reports the same slang term, “Maytag,” being used to refer to a feminized inmate in New York City’s County Jail at Riker’s Island (2013: 78).
- 8 Only 4 of the approximately 25+ bichotes whom we met or documented through oral histories were women.
- 9 The officer is warning Raffy that street sellers he has recently arrested have been “snitching [informing]” on him.
- 10 In Philadelphia slang, “jawn” is an indefinite referential noun. Its meaning is inferred from the context of a conversation—in this sentence it stands in for Lucas’s AK automatic rifle.
- 11 We thank Andres Antillano for calling our attention to “virtuous power.” Elsewhere we have argued that the punitive carceral management of inner city narcotics markets has generated a parasitical version of Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation whereby profits become artificially elevated by the state sanction of illegality, with capital accumulating through the destruction of resources—in this case the addiction and incarceration of both the labor force and the industry’s customers (Bourgois and Hart 2016). See also the critical reformulation of primitive accumulation as predatory accumulation in Bourgois (2018).

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