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10 THE VIOLENCE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE SEGREGATED US INNER-CITY NARCOTICS MARKETS OF THE PUERTO RICAN COLONIAL DIASPORA

Raffy, the *bichote* [Puerto Rican Spanglish double entendre for “big shot”/“drug boss”/large phallus] 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 “caseworker,” the local term for a bichote’s second-in-command, who is responsible for managing the shifts of sellers and lookouts on a drug corner. Soon we are surrounded by half-a-dozen of his off-and-on-duty heroin and cocaine sellers, wannabe sellers, and teenage and pre-teenage bored kids. They are all eager—like me—to be around the big shot boss. When he shows up on the block, Raffy becomes the charismatic nexus for action, money, power, potential, and risk. Perhaps most importantly, he is also the only provider of local employment in this desolate, almost all Puerto Rican, formerly industrial inner city neighborhood.

A police car cruises slowly down the block. We tense up and avoid eye contact while simultaneously trying to look bored and indifferent. 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! A buncha' people I locked up been telling me about you. His voice rises to a shout: "Go home, bitch . . . right now!" Residents of the block's cramped two-story row homes have raised their windows and some are cautiously stepping out onto their stoops to watch the volatile spectacle of a police raid at sunset.

Raffy snaps his mouth shut, spins around, and obediently starts walking away from the officer. 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 working class Italian-American movie icon whose billion-dollar series of eight-plus blockbuster films spanning the 1970s through the late 2010s was set and filmed in this very same neighborhood as it transitioned from all white to nearly all Puerto Rican. The crowd of employees, wannabes, young admirers, and curious or concerned neighbors breaks into laughter and starts following Raffy as he continues walking—but in slow motion now—up the block. Fists raised above his head, Raffy defiantly pumps the Rocky salute in rhythm with each of his now deliberately slow steps.

The irate officer flushes a deeper shade of red and, spittle flying from his mouth, explodes in another slew of "fatasses" and "bitches." He reholsters his baton and, lunging forward to follow Raffy, raises his arms to pump his fists to match the challenge, sputtering, "I'll fight you right now. . . . Right now." His barely contained potbelly bursts through the bottom button of his uniform and spills onto his holster belt laden with pistol, taser, baton, walkie-talkie, and other bulky, standard, police officer public order peace-keeping accessories. The momentum of his belly and overloaded belt almost makes him fall on his face in the middle of the street, prompting roars of laughter from the growing crowd. Someone starts a chant: "Dickhead! Dickhead!"

I notice that the caseworker, Tito, is not joining the chanting. He is hanging back at the edge of the crowd, calling out to the youths in front of him: "Yo, stop! Shut up. You don't know what you're doin'. . . ." I'm impressed, Tito is

clearly trying to de-escalate this confrontation that I fear will end in a brutal police beatdown on charges of resisting arrest or assaulting an officer.

The driver of the patrol car has now also reluctantly jumped out into the middle of the street. He is loudly calling for reinforcements into a walkie-talkie pinned to his left shoulder, making sure the crowd can hear the threat of potential disaster awaiting anyone out on the street right now. He glares and palm-slaps his baton for emphasis. The chanters, however, have turned their back on him to follow behind Raffy in a spontaneous parade of support. Still trying to catch up, his irate partner continues to pursue Raffy, fists raised in his awkward imitation of Raffy; but his taunts, "bitch . . . fatass," are drowned out by the crowd's now louder chorus of "dickheads."

Raffy reaches the corner first. The crowd assembles around him but backs away when the two officers catch up and barge through, batons raised, reaching for Raffy. The crowd then immediately recloses around the officers into a tighter circle and, disconcerted, the officers lower their batons. Several youths are holding up cell phones to video-record the confrontation. Raffy drops into a squat and goose-steps around the irate officer in a chicken dance, clucking and flapping his elbows, stunning all of us into a momentary awed silence. I can't believe what I am seeing. Raffy stands up suddenly and, maintaining a dignified, bichote-like demeanor in stark contrast to the sputtering officer, then announces in an authoritative voice, "Meet me in the gym. We'll put on gloves. . . . Not out here on the street like bitches."

Three patrol cars screech around the corner and six more officers jump out, batons in hand. The police/crowd stalemate has suddenly broken. The youths closest to the patrol cars jump backward and the calmer officer takes advantage of their retreat to grab Raffy's left elbow, twisting it expertly behind Raffy's back into handcuffs. He then yanks Raffy up off his feet by his handcuffed wrists, presumably trying to dislocate his shoulders, but Raffy adroitly uses the momentum to dive forward through the open back door of the patrol car awaiting his arrest. He ducks his head just in time under the doorframe and avoids a blow to his head but lands face down on the backseat. Gasping for breath, he squirms upright in the seat with his handcuffed arms tightly pinned behind him and manages to regain his composure. In fact, still playing to the crowd, Raffy opens his mouth widely in what looks like a full-throated, full belly laugh, but we cannot hear him because another officer has already slammed the door shut, regained the driver's seat, and revved the motor.

The crowd's solidarity, the plethora of cell phones videoing, and Raffy's charismatic agility saved him from the standard on-the-spot retaliatory outcomes of such confrontational arrests [e.g., sprained handcuffed wrists, a dislocated shoulder, a concussed head, fractured ribs, multiple tazerings, or just another routine black-and-blue, tooth-splintering inner-city police beatdown]—if not a deadly blaze of bullets.

The irate officer is on a roll now, and lunges after Wiwi, a sixteen-year-old wheelchair-bound hustler who makes the mistake of trying to rush to his home across the street. Wiwi has a juvenile sunset "curfew condition" imposed on him from an arrest earlier in the week and the moon has already risen overhead in the now pitch-black sky. The officer grabs the right handle of Wiwi's wheelchair and drags him to the far side of the patrol car as another officer flings open the rear door. He tries to throw the disabled adolescent directly from his wheelchair into the back seat next to Raffy, but Wiwi is wearing a seatbelt and the entire chair lifts into the air. Both the officer and the disabled adolescent curfew violator fall backward on the pavement.

Aghast, none of us laugh—even the "dickheads" chorus falls silent. Several adult onlookers have the courage to raise their voices in protest, "Nah nah, Officer! He ain't doin' nothin'. He's just goin' home. The young 'bol' [Philadelphia slang for young man] lives right here [pointing to a house across the street]." The cop yells back, "I got every right to arrest him! I got him with bundles [wholesale packets of drugs prepackaged for retail sale] just last week." Wiwi adds his teenager's 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?" Sixteen-year-old Wiwi has, indeed, burst into flowing tears of rage and frustration.

Wiwi's mother has rushed out of her house and is pushing 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, raises her hand as if to slap him, but instead yells, "*Callate, hijo* [shut up, son]." Her motherly disciplinary intervention appears to temporarily pacify the irate officer.

Wiwi, obviously mortified, has broken into sobs. He undoes his seatbelt and tries to throw himself from his chair directly into the back of the open patrol car door next to Raffy. He shouts hoarsely, "Okay, okay, arrest me, dickheads. My lawyer's gonna. . . ." His arms, however, are not strong enough and

his wheelchair tips over. His mother catches him just in time, jams him back down behind his seatbelt, and wheels him home rapidly.

Two more patrol cars skid to a stop and we disperse onto stoops and inside houses. The police, however, make no more arrests. Instead, they rapidly cram back into their vehicles and screech off, with Raffy, in a stench of burnt rubber.

I am standing next to Tito, the young caseworker, and hear him making multiple urgent phone calls to "re-up product." Sweating and barking out orders, he announces with bichote-style authority, "We openin' back up." This is his exciting break, a chance to rise in the "food chain," as he later explains it to us. Anticipating that a district attorney prosecutor might throw the book at Raffy, Tito is hoping he can take over as interim bichote on this profitable block without having to pay rent, or fight for control.

Only minutes after the police have left, the usual stream of customers—most of them white—is already flowing again, cash in hand. Many are emaciated, limping, and covered in scabs and rags, conjuring images of concentration-camp survivors on a final death march. I hear a scrawny young white youth with a filthy bloodstained bandage wrapped around his forehead bargaining with Tito to exchange a "nine millimeter Glock" for "a bundle [fourteen ten-dollar packets] of dope [heroin] and a bundle of powder [cocaine] in the mornin'."

During a lull in the selling, one of the hottest-headed "dickhead" chanters, perhaps jealous of Tito's opportunistic commandeering of the corner, or maybe just hedging his bets, hoping to be hired by Tito's caseworker, raises his hand to slap Tito a high-five, bragging, "The cops was drawlin' [acting inappropriately]. We should'a beaten 'em up." This prompts an almost conventional businessman's rebuke from Tito about the stupidity of their 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, laughing: "Nah, they just angry at us 'cause we the out-laws and they can't be." Tito cracks up laughing too and fist-bumps the hothead's still hanging high five. A white customer interrupts them in an impatient rush for his fix and they go right back to the mundane business of retail drug sales, exchanging packets, play-boxing, counting money, replenishing from the stash, periodically pausing to roll blunts and play-box, releasing the tension and the boredom. Clouds of marijuana waft into the chill of the late

autumn night. Dollars, dope, and powder are passing dizzyingly fast hand to hand, and there are no police sirens or police helicopter motors audible, no searchlights or rooftop strobe lightbars in sight. The night shift is back in full gear.

To our surprise, a few days after the police confrontation described in this field note, a sympathetic judge dismissed the bogus assault charges filed against Raffy by the wannabe-Rocky officer. Raffy immediately returned to the block and took back control of sales from his caseworker Tito. To our further surprise, he started hanging out even more conspicuously, and generously treating his sellers, us, and the other neighbors to sodas and hoagies [mid-Atlantic slang for overstuffed lunchmeat sandwich roll]. He also deepened his relationship to us, agreeing to tape-record his life history.

Tito strategically quit as Raffy's second-in-command because the humiliated police were raiding nearly every day and sometimes several times a day. We followed his example, staying inside more and peering cautiously through the window of the subdivided row-home apartment we rented. All members of our ethnographic team fit the profiles of the kind of people the narcotics teams routinely targeted in their dragnets. Indeed, within two weeks, Raffy was arrested on narcotics charges two more times and a notoriously draconian judge sentenced him to a completely unanticipated sentence of twelve and a half to twenty-five years in prison on a probation-violation technicality (no option for a jury trial), because of an outstanding drug sales conviction, compounding this with the maximum sentences for each of the two new arrests, "stacking" [adding] them consecutively rather than overlapping them "concurrently." We were rapidly forced to learn the inscrutably complex machinations of the Philadelphia courts.

Raising the stakes even higher, another former bichote, Panama Red, burst onto the scene. Newly released from prison, he had a reputation for "liking to play with guns." Everyone anticipated that Panama Red would try to take over direct control over the block, and that, as an elderly grandmother warned Fernando and George, "a body is going to fall." Astutely, Panama Red stepped back from direct supervision, and rented out the corner for \$5,000 a week to a subcontractor, yet another ambitious younger wannabe-bichote from the block who quickly seized the opportunity, but was arrested within a few months in an FBI sting facilitated by a jilted girlfriend while fetching a kilo of cocaine from Miami. We never heard from him again; rumors circulated that he had fled just in time to Puerto Rico and set up a barber shop with his remaining capital.

The tempo of arrests inexplicably slowed down, as it always did in the mysterious ebbs and flows of the incompetent offensives of inner-city police narcotics patrol teams. In Philadelphia, as in many large cities across the United States, narcotics units have to be purposefully rotated out of neighborhoods every few weeks or months to prevent the inevitable institutionalization of corruption. The easy money and high profits associated with illegal drugs and arbitrary discretionary power of officers blur the boundary between criminal perpetrator and law enforcement agent. Philadelphia newspapers documented hundreds of examples of egregious police corruption and brutality scandals during our core fieldwork years, 2007–2021. The coverage includes a Pulitzer Prize–winning series on a notorious narcotics team in our micro-neighborhood that combined theft of legal storekeepers as well as street sellers with sexual abuse (Denvir 2013; Ruderman and Laker 2015). Corruption extended to the highest levels of criminal justice in the city. In 2017, Philadelphia's head district attorney, Seth Williams, was indicted on corruption and bribery charges (Roebuck 2017). In 2019, the police commissioner, Richard Ross, who was hired to reform abuses in the department, was forced to resign for sexually harassing an officer (Marin et al. 2019). During those same years, multiple beat level police officers—sometimes several dozen at a time—were charged with crimes and abuses (Bender and Gambacorta 2019).

Since its origin in the 1800s the Philadelphia Police Department has been systemically unable to rid itself of corruption and scandal and has failed to hold officers accountable, even when caught flagrantly in illegal acts (Pennsylvania Crime Commission 1974; Green-Geisler 2003). The department's multiple class-action suits and federal consent decrees and attempts to hire reformist police commissioners since at least the 1970s have not remediated the problem. Philadelphia's Home-Rule Charter—which itself was an attempt to give crucial City agencies autonomy from abusive manipulation by the machine politics plaguing most US big cities—gives the police union (“Fraternal Order of Police”), de facto veto power over firings and sanctions through arbitration processes. Union-controlled arbiters routinely reinstate officers convicted of crimes. Ironically, arbiters even order the city to reimburse delinquent guilty officers for the “theoretical overtime” they “hypothetically lost” during the months or years they were removed from desk duty or fired while they were on trial or under arbitration review (Denvir 2014; Ruderman and Laker 2011).

Systemic police corruption and abuse is good for the retail level narcotics industry. In 2008 when Panama Red's interim wannabe-bichote sub-

contractor/renter was arrested, narcotics units' arrests ceased on the block because the officers were rotated to another poor neighborhood of the city. Panama Red judged it safe enough for him to take back direct control of sales on the block and extend shift hours, hiring two new caseworkers: one for a 12-hour day shift and the other for a 12-hour graveyard shift. Over the next eighteen months, Panama Red managed to keep the block open 24/7 in a flagrant cat-and-rooster dance with the police, who intermittently continued to raid but focused primarily on arresting the addicted customers and the lowest-level sellers. They rarely even managed to locate the temporary "stashers" where the sellers on duty temporarily hide their shift's wholesale supply of heroin and/or cocaine prepackaged for retail sales.

SCRAMBLING FOR UPWARD MOBILITY ON THE CORNER

We were initially baffled by Raffy's provocative response to the abusive police officer on the night of his arrest. In fact, it took us years to unravel the "everyday emergencies" (transporting philosopher Walter Benjamin's phrase from the Nazi era to the contemporary US inner city) of violence and arrests besetting our neighborhood (Taussig 2014). Commonsensically, seasoned bichotes usually avoid spending time at their retail sales points lest they attract police attention or over-expose themselves to attacks by rivals. Consequently, we had been even more surprised when Raffy insisted on continuing to hang out so visibly at his sales spot, despite the likelihood of police revenge after his release by the sympathetic judge. At the time we did not yet understand the economic, cultural, and personal stakes propelling Raffy to take such spectacular risks and be so generous and outgoing to us and so many of the neighbors. We came to understand that Raffy's performative visibility and risk taking was actually a desperate attempt to retain his fragile bid to control this valuable territory through his charismatic reputation in the moral economy. He was under violent siege, not only by Panama Red, who ultimately did seize control, but also by his estranged business partner, Lucas, who had formerly been his primary cocaine supplier, and also lived on the block.

We also did not yet fully understand the importance to narcotics profits—or the complexity—of the Philadelphia slang term *rider*. Riders provide violent backup for one another in times of conflict. A rider's reputation accrues from engaging in especially brutal violence performed in a culturally appropriate, dignified manner. Bichotes, caseworkers, and even entry-level hand-to-hand sellers cultivate obligations for mutually assistive

violence among networks of riders as a protection against betrayal and victimization. We have referred to this as the “moral economy of violence,” to communicate its crucial valence to pragmatic material/personal interests and his physical/emotional security in the absence of public state legal services and sanctions for mediating economic disputes peacefully (Karandinos et al. 2014). The ability to rapidly mobilize loyal, violent minions is most obviously the best way to enforce cash-only contracts in the multibillion-dollar narcotics industry. More subtly, it also intimidates potentially disgruntled neighbors, rivals, and jealous friends who might be tempted (or coerced) by the police to serve as informants.

Amid this generalized violence, however, the bichote must establish a *pax narcotica* (Bourgois and Hart 2016), because peace is good for business, and facilitates a steadier flow of retail customers. Peace also keeps a street corner under the radar screen of the police. The moral economy of violence, consequently, counterintuitively is transformed into a reputation for being able to “keep the peace” because the legitimation of violent hegemony ensures: 1) prompt payments of debts; 2) labor discipline; 3) product integrity; 4) cash flow, and 5) freedom from snitching and incarceration.

FIELDWORK, THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND ITS NARCOTICS MARKETS IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF DEINDUSTRIALIZATION

Our impoverished block was a cash cow. On days when the police did not raid our block, one hundred “bundles” of heroin and forty of cocaine were sold per shift. Bundles usually consisted of fourteen ten-dollar retail packets of product. For heroin, this represented less than 0.003 grams of product. Cocaine packets varied more, because its pure form weighs more than heroin, as do many of its cuts, and it absorbs moisture more readily. Furthermore, cocaine wholesale markets appear to be more diversified and directly accessible to the island of Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican neighborhoods in the US Rust Belt, usually mediated by undocumented Dominican and Colombian suppliers higher up in the smuggling chains (Bourgois 2018; Contreras 2013; Rosenblum et al. 2014). Ultimately, on many—if not most—days on our block at least \$14,000 worth of cash in untraceable ten-dollar bills was changing hands every twelve hours without a single dollar going missing. Our block had a decent reputation for drug potency and a higher Puerto Rican segregation-level than most other census tracts, but many dozens, if not hundreds of other blocks in Philadelphia’s Puerto Rican-majority blocks had equally good (or better) reputations (Volk 2011). The whirlwind of

drug boss arrests and successions described thus far occurred early in the long-term participant observation fieldwork project we carried out as a team in Philadelphia from the fall of 2007 through the summer of 2013 with frequent onsite follow-up fieldwork through 2015, and periodic interviews/visits ongoing through the date of this publication. We had rented an apartment in the heart of the city's approximately three hundred square block Puerto Rican inner city, a zone of decaying subdivided two-story row homes clustered tightly around huge abandoned red-brick factories interspersed by vacant lots and piles of rubble. Two members of our ethnographic team (George Karandinos and Fernando Montero Castrillo) lived in the apartment, on a block with active drug sales, full-time (2008–13). We socialized with our neighbors, hanging out on stoops, in homes, and at the sales points. We accompanied arrestees through the criminal justice system, and visited them when they were incarcerated.

Referred to as “North Philadelphia” by local Puerto Ricans and African Americans and as “Kensington” by whites and the press, the neighborhood has hosted Philadelphia's most consistently active open-air narcotics markets since at least the 1980s (Richards 1994; Rosenblum et al. 2014), when Puerto Ricans had the bad luck of immigrating in search of factory employment at the height of deindustrialization. Instead of factory work they found themselves shunted into the burgeoning global narcotics industry. For over half a century, this end point in the global narcotics market has been serving low-cost, high-potency heroin and cocaine to primarily white customers from the four-state region of southern New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania (Bourgeois and Hart 2011; Rosenblum et al. 2014).

The larger neighborhood had been Philadelphia's nineteenth-century industrial heartland, and its infrastructure was devastated by public- and private services-sector abandonment, and an exponential rise in public investment in punitive policing and hyper-incarceration (Wacquant 2010). Manufacturing jobs decreased more than twelvefold between the early 1950s and the mid-2010s (US Bureau of Labor Statistics Database), and court sentences were dramatically lengthened (Gottschalk 2015; Alexander 2010). The streets around us were riddled with abandoned factories, decaying row homes, vacant lots, defunct railroad lines, and random piles of rubble and garbage. Throughout our fieldwork years, there were virtually no legal businesses offering any significant source of legal employment within ten blocks of our apartment, and almost half of the households in our census tract had annual incomes below the US federal poverty line. The multibillion-dollar global narcotics industry had flooded into this economic

vacuum during the late 1980s, when the powder cocaine epidemic morphed into the infamous crack epidemic. Through the 1990s and 2000s the price of both heroin and cocaine dropped even lower, and their potencies continued to rise. In 2013–14, potency further spiked with the entry of fentanyl into the supply chain, wreaking havoc along its path. Our neighborhood became a national epicenter of the US overdose epidemic. Youth growing up on our block, unable to find legal jobs, found themselves selling opiates and cocaine in the shadows of the factories that used to employ their grandparents. The state's punitive response of law enforcement brutality and chronic hyper-incarceration further compounded the routinized occupational injuries of addiction and interpersonal violence that accompany illegal drug sales.

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 the young men we befriended. We are interested in linking the intimate experience of violence in the US inner city to the larger political, economic, and historical forces that turn US inner cities into concrete killing fields. These forces include, most importantly, (1) neoliberal globalization and financialization that has dramatically increased income inequality, (2) narcotics monopoly profits that are artificially elevated by illegality, (3) a global arms industry that thrives on ineffective US gun control laws, and, most visibly, (4) the carceral mismanagement of racialized poverty and unemployment. What follows is an account of how these forces play out in the lives of two brothers, Tito (Raffy's caseworker in the opening field note) and Tito's little brother, Leo, as they both came of age on our block. From their perspective, they were ambitiously seizing the only "actually existing" opportunities for a sliver of the "American dream" in the segregated inner city into which they were born.

CHURNING THROUGH CHRONIC INCARCERATION

Virtually every "hustler" who made "hand-to-hand" retail sales on the regular six- to twelve-hour shifts, and most caseworkers in the spatially enclaved economic niche we studied were arrested—often multiple times—within a few months of being hired. The police relied on racial profiling (customers = whites/sellers = Puerto Ricans) and primarily targeted hand-to-hand sellers and customers during their frequent raids. This maximized the number of low-level arrests with the least amount of effort, thereby increasing opportunities for officers to generate overtime pay as witnesses

in multiple court appearances. The city's court and jail system were overwhelmed by this volume of nonviolent, low-level misdemeanor arrests (primarily "narcotics possession" and petty sales of ten-dollar packets of heroin or cocaine). The criminal justice system was incapable of following due process by bringing so many arrestees to a jury trial. Consequently, judges routinely temporarily released narcotics misdemeanants on low bails pending arraignment and prolonged plea bargaining arrangements. Police officers, in response, systematically overcharged misdemeanants with a litany of false or exaggerated felony accusations, enabling the District Attorney's prosecutors to offer a "reduced" plea bargain that carried shorter prison terms of two-to-four years, so long as arrestees waived their right to "trial."

Most corners in the neighborhood were controlled by a *bichote* who hired caseworkers who managed six- to twelve-hour shifts staffed by hand-to-hand sellers called hustlers or *joseadores*, an onomatopoeic Spanglish rendition of the English slang word. The caseworkers and the hustlers were at highest risk of arrest, and were paid only a commission of their sales. They usually shared between ten and forty dollars of every \$140 worth of product sold (depending upon their negotiated arrangements with a particular *bichote*) in response to market shifts, personal venalities, and/or shifts in supply and demand of available workers following police raids. To further decrease their risk of arrest and/or assault, caseworkers and sometimes also hustlers proactively paid part of their commission to a "runner" who transported the prepackaged wholesale bundles for shifts from a supplier or a "packing house." They often also shared another portion of their commission with part-time "lookouts." Most corners closed before midnight, but the most profitable ones, like Panama Red's, operated 24/7, employing dozens of local residents in multiple hierarchically remunerated and differentially risky labor roles.

Ironically, the confusing array of specific roles in the labor hierarchy was chameleon-like, flexibly contracting or expanding to accommodate the inevitable disruptions of police raids, which foment yet more opportunities for temporary windfall earnings or seizures of new territory. Distinct tasks could be temporarily combined on an emergency just-in-time basis, depending upon who was suddenly arrested, shot, AWOL on a shift, or might need to generate extra income.

The flexibility and pragmatic adaptability of diversified, hierarchical positions at sales points enabled sales to persist despite frequent police raids. More subtly, on the level of subjectivity formation, the differentially remunerated risk-inflected roles of this high-stakes, illegal, but often

profitable labor market resonated culturally with charismatic, masculine patronage tures. Even more ironic, it was also consistent with the quintessential hard-working American immigrant dream of upward mobility—promising a meteoric rise in the local labor force for those ambitious youths blessed by good luck, courage, and astute entrepreneurial skills.

A profound “symbolic violence” (invoking Bourdieu 2000) consequently pervaded this inner-city version of the Horatio Alger “rags to riches” dream (Contreras 2013). It confused underlings into respecting or accommodating the profit-making hierarchies that victimized them and benefited bichotes. Both bichotes and peers alike publicly blamed arrested hustlers for being careless “knuckleheads,” ridiculing them for smoking too much marijuana, taking too many opioid pills, or becoming distracted by sexual flirtations.

Perversely, turnover from arrests and occupational violence/substance use disorder was so prevalent that it was not unrealistic for street sellers and lookouts to suddenly have an opportunity to ascend the local labor hierarchy on their corner. We witnessed several cases of meteoric upward mobility like Tito’s—usually followed or preceded by a murder, a shoot-out, or an arrest. The younger members of a crew would convince themselves that they could sell more adeptly than their careless predecessors and could rise to become the next caseworker, bichote, or supplier. The inevitability of their arrest in the context of the US drug war and hyper-incarceration was invisible. Sadly, the everyday emergencies of police raids were interpreted as moments of opportunity to be seized, rather than a forewarning of the likelihood of their own future incarceration. Most parents, even those involved in the narcotics economy, lamented having to raise their children on the block because of the appeal of hand-to-hand selling to their teenagers, who were tempted to drop out of their neighborhood’s dysfunctional high schools and scramble in the entry-level retail narcotics markets.

TERRITORIAL CONTROL AND CULTIVATING “VIRTUOUS POWER”

We documented well over a dozen bichote transitions within our micro-neighborhood during our fieldwork. These territorial successions became pressure cookers for violent confrontations that sometimes lasted several weeks or months, with multiple rivals jockeying for control, like the tug-of-war between Raffy/Panama Red/Lucas. As noted, however, aspiring bichotes could not rely on brute force alone. Their longevity ultimately hinged on their ability to be recognized as a respected “leader among equals” who was beneficial for everyone. Bichotes consequently needed to cultivate a

hegemony of what Venezuelan criminologist and social critic Andres Antillano calls “virtuous power” (personal communication). This moral economy of violence dynamic of legitimizing territorial control requires continuous and innumerable sociable assertions of generosity. The most resilient bichotes intersperse acts of expressive brutality and masculine bravado—such as Raffy’s reckless displays of comic provocation against the irate police officer—with acts of charismatic generosity and combined counterintuitively, with expressions of personal humility to defuse envy or resentment over hierarchy.

Had Raffy not been imprisoned with a twelve-and-a-half- to twenty-five-year sentence, he would likely have maintained control of the block, because he was respected by many of our neighbors. Many admired him for preferring old-fashioned fisticuffs to the spectacularly murderous gunplay at which Panama Red excelled. During the three-way divide-and-conquer tug of war between Panama Red, Raffy, and Lucas, Tito eloquently communicated his genuine respect for Raffy’s physical courage, and proved it by loyally siding with Raffy as one of his loyal riders (even though he had astutely already quit as his caseworker to avoid arrest).

TITO: First, Panama Red’s bols started taking the coke off of Lucas’s sellers. Raffy was ready to fight but Lucas didn’t want to ride and he started bitchin’ to Raffy, “I’m just going to pay rent to Panama Red.”

But when Panama Red started taking the dope off of Raffy’s hustlers too, Raffy beat him up. No gunplay! Just knocked him to the ground with his hands [shadow boxing enthusiastically]. Knocked him right under his own truck!

After that, Raffy said, “Fuck this, Lucas ain’t riding, so I’m going to take the powder from him too.” Cause he didn’t really have no respect for Lucas at that point. So beef started bubbling up between Raffy and Lucas too.

Lucas got powdered up [high on cocaine] and came out the house at Raffy with his AK. At first he had the jawn [Philadelphia slang for an indefinite noun defined by context, in this case “jawn” refers to Lucas’s AK-47 machine gun] pointed to the side and Raffy was like, “Yo, n—, don’t point that shit at me.” But Lucas, I guess he had some courage from all that powder, and kept it pointed at Raffy, and that n— started dancing. Like, “Oh shit!”—Ducking around, scared as hell, ready to dive.

Reenacting the scene, Tito opened his eyes wide and feigned a terrified adrenaline rush. He hopped from foot to foot, swayed his body, waving his arms, and ducking his head.

TITO: But instead, Lucas went back into his house. I grabbed my ratchet [gun], and so did my brother Leo. It was me, Raffy, and Leo waiting for Lucas up the block, ready to put that shit full of holes.

Lucas came out and saw us waiting at the corner and he went right back in the house and didn't come out for days. But by then it was too late, Raffy was already locked up and Panama Red had this block poppin' with the fire dope. That n— Lucas don't have no heart [spitting in disgust].

VIOLENCE AND INCARCERATION: TITO'S EXPERIENCE

None of this mortal risk turmoil dissuaded Tito from his ongoing pursuit of upward mobility.

TITO: I don't even know what stamp [brand name of heroin] Panama Red's peoples be sellin' now because the cops been raidin' and I've gone up the food chain puttin' out my own work [drugs] on a corner over there [motioning vaguely with his chin toward a nearby block with multiple active salespoints parallel to us].

Tito was thrilled about having just seized yet another chance opportunity that opened up when a bichote who ran a nearby corner was suddenly shot dead by the little brother of one of his caseworkers, whom the slain bichote had failed to bail out after an arrest. The murdered bichote's widow trusted Tito, having known him since he was a little boy. She also needed to act fast because one of her late husband's cousins, an unknown outsider, was trying to take over the block by brute force. Consequently, she offered Tito an exceptionally low rent, only \$500 a week—a tenth of what Panama Red was receiving at that time from his temporary subcontractor/renter on our block. Tito immediately partnered with a childhood friend who had just purchased a brand-new .357 Magnum, and they eagerly agreed to an arrangement with the widow, promising to also defend her right to her husband's corner from her cousin-in-law, in addition to paying the discounted rent. Business immediately boomed, only to come to a disastrous end three months later when Tito accidentally killed his best-friend/partner during a drunken and benzodiazepine-addled celebration of their three-month anniversary as fledgling bichotes on such a bargain-priced drug corner. Tito's judge, yet another notorious hard-liner, initially insisted on charging Tito with homicide—carrying a seventeen- to thirty-four-year sentence—despite the fact that everyone, including the arresting police officers, Tito's pub-

lic defender, and even the mother of the slain youth, knew the shooting had been a genuine accident, and should have qualified Tito for the much shorter “involuntary manslaughter” charge of two and a half to five years.

We visited Tito in the county jail on multiple occasions. On the first visit, Tito walked into the visitors’ room with his face covered in scratches.

TITO: I just got in a fight with some black bol and look, [raising his shirt to reveal a deep crimson circular bruise in the center of his chest] the motherfucker bit me! 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 n— 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’. Like I’m some kinda’ pussy.

I guess ‘cause 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. I know if I came in here like a savage then he wouldn’a done that.

Now I might end up killing this n—, ‘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.

The over-fourfold explosion in the size of the incarcerated population in the United States since 1980 has turned prisons into de facto gladiator schools that hone the fighting skills and transform the habitus of inmates, sabotaging their future ability to find legal employment when they are released (Contreras 2013: 69–83). The structural brutality of overcrowded US jails dramatically raises the stakes for cultivating violent reputations and propagates racist prison gangs as each ethnic group scrambles for self-protection. Inmates often become aggressively violent in order to avoid victimization, and are then trapped in a catch-22 feedback loop of solitary confinement, extended prison sentences, and punitive lockdowns that damage their mental health. These cycles of fury and frustration are further exacerbated by the institutionalization of routine arbitrary bullying by often poorly trained and overwhelmed guards (Bauer 2018). Describing his first fight in jail, for example, Tito mentioned with a shrug, “When I saw the bol was trying to stab me I asked the CO [Correctional Officer] ‘don’t lock us in’ [the cell together] but the CO did anyway.”

In the routinized context of institutionalized carceral brutality, it is easy to understand the survival utility of Tito learning how to fly into a

“blind rage” and beat a fellow inmate insensate inside his locked jail cell. Tito is Puerto Rican and, as he points out, “small,” in an African American–dominated, overcrowded county jail supervised primarily by white guards in a racist institutional culture. As a baby-faced nineteen-year-old facing a long-term prison sentence, Tito must ensure, for his survival, self-respect, and sanity, that he does not become a mark for bullies, whether inmates or correctional officials.

Tito has no difficulty identifying the infrastructural context generating the extreme levels of interpersonal violence among his fellow inmates in his maximum-security “lockdown” unit. Violence in this institutional context becomes a “social fact” (invoking Durkheim 1951). Each individual act may appear to be precipitated by the idiosyncrasy of the personalities of perpetrators but, from a sociological perspective, the systemic phenomenon of carceral interpersonal violence cannot usefully be understood as being the “choice” of individuals. Tito’s fight is more usefully interpreted as the product of what anthropologist Paul Farmer and others have called “structural violence” (Farmer 2003), or alternatively what Philippe Bourgois and Nancy Scheper-Hughes have categorized as “everyday violence” or “normalized violence” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Bourgois 2010). These approaches to violence highlight the invisible forces of political-economic inequality and the institutional and bureaucratic frameworks that generate the spectacularly visible interpersonal criminal violence that has become normalized in the United States, where the firearm murder rate in 2010 was ten times higher than that of comparably wealthy nations (Geneva Small Arms Survey 2012).

Tito recognized the oppressive effects of structural forces, but his critical insight on the normalization of abuse in US jails did not stop the institutionalized brutality from seeping into his subjectivity to become a core component of his own conception of masculine self-respect:

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 going home soon, or if they ain't ever goin' home. Plus, we in close custody. They got us on lockdown half the time because of some shanking [stabbing]. There ain't shit to do. You just sit in your cell all day bored and frustrated. That's half the reason there be so many problems. We might kill each other over ten minutes on the phone. Or hot water in the shower, or whatever.

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 is no choice. You can't just let them treat you like a bitch 'cause then everyone be sayin', "He a pussy. Ain't gonna do anything." And walk up in your cell, "Look n—, gimme all that, or I'm a fuck you up." 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 nobody take that away from me! My mama didn't raise no pussy.

We were concerned that Tito might not survive in the county jail waiting for trial, so we sought out Don Ricardo—another charismatic former bichote who had completed a fifteen-year sentence for a road-rage murder he committed in his early twenties. Against all odds, Don Ricardo had managed to reintegrate himself into the legal labor market in his early forties. He prided himself on his redemption as a just-above-minimum-wage, part-time janitor cleaning offices, but he also cultivated his prominent retired, "OG" Original gangster presence on the block surrounded by his extended family and loyal riders. He frequently doled out advice to the young street hustlers, who respected him for his history as a successful, violent, and generous bichote. We were hoping to persuade Don Ricardo to call Tito and advise him to refrain from engaging in such excessive violence in jail, but Don Ricardo cut us short:

DON RICARDO: Naaahh! I don't see nothing wrong with what Tito did. Tito did right to fight. He is going to have to fight a lot, especially in his weight class. Tito gotta show that he don't care how little he is. You can't show that you fear nobody.

If Tito keeps fighting like that, trust me, he'll be all right. He ain't gonna win all his fights, but he'll get his respect . . . make a reputation.

It's not just Tito's problem. The black people in the county [jail]—especially the Muslims [a racialized Philadelphia prison gang]—try to take your heart. Can't let them bully you or they're gonna call you Maytag [term for a feminized inmate]. You gonna be washing their underwear, dirty shitty underwear, and then you gotta be givin' that booty up. I seen smaller guys than Tito kill guys real quick during a prison lockdown. Yo! I remember one. It was a major riot. The whole prison went wild.

Caught in the momentum of a carceral riot flashback, Don Ricardo was suddenly on his feet, animated, slashing the air in front of him as if he had a "Gillette [razor]" in his hand.

The profit margins of narcotics sales, dramatically inflated by illegality, are what most proximately fuel high levels of violence on inner-city streets, awash with automatic weapons and untraceable cash. Less proximately, but no less important, is the structural political-economic reality of Puerto Rican vulnerability to violence and narcotics has been historically driven by the island of Puerto Rico's status as a former colony of the United States ever since its invasion by US Marines in 1898. The hijacking of the island's political administrative system disarticulated its economy, expelling over half of its population as cheap wage laborers to the US mainland (Dietz 1982; Bonilla et al. 1986; Caban 2002; Santory Jorge and Quintero Rivera 2018). Literally driven by hunger, formerly rural or shantytown-dwelling unemployed Puerto Ricans have been desperately emigrating to segregated inner cities like Philadelphia, seeking sweatshop jobs precisely when factories in those cities were moving overseas, as industrial corporations sought tax-free (and labor- and environmental regulation-free) off-shore production sites (Bourgeois 2003). This "globalization" process devastated "rustbelt" cities of the Northeast and Midwest who Puerto Ricans migrated as colonized subjects especially vulnerable to drug epidemics.

Formal colonies are an anomaly in the twenty-first century and normally represent an international embarrassment to their imperial, military-economic masters. Nevertheless, more than a century after its occupation, Puerto Rico remains (as of 2021) an "unincorporated overseas territory" of the United States. Although residents of Puerto Rico have US citizenship and must obey federal laws and regulations, they cannot vote in US elections and, lacking states' rights, their economy is subject to involuntary US federal oversight. Typical of the perversity of colonial regimes of unequal status, Puerto Ricans receive the full legal rights of US citizenship only if they take up permanent residence on the US mainland.

In the 2000s, Puerto Rico's dysfunctional colonial status imploded economically. After a decade-long decline in the island's domestic economy, the US Supreme Court thwarted a desperate attempt by the Puerto Rican governor to file for public-sector bankruptcy in 2016. Worse yet, US Congress also imposed a seven-member Control Board, nicknamed the "junta," which imposed an economic austerity plan prioritizing debt payments to US hedge funds and vulture capital creditors. Meanwhile, social welfare services including public employee retirement pensions for Puerto Rican

residents were slashed, and the Puerto Rican domestic economy continued to decline while residents desperately emigrated in search of employment in ever larger numbers (Epps 2016; Williams Walsh 2017a, 2017b). According to US Department of Labor reports, in the mid-2010s at the height of our fieldwork, over 46.2 percent of Puerto Ricans on the island lived below the US poverty line. This is more than three times the US mainland's poverty rate. Most important, legal labor force participation rates in 2017 dropped to 40 percent—more than one-third lower than that of the US mainland's already low rate of 62 percent. These economic dislocations pushed even higher proportions of the working-age population into the island's increasingly violent underground economy. Murder rates in Puerto Rico are approximately five times higher than those on the US mainland (Bourgeois 2015).

Ironically, it is precisely the peculiarity of Puerto Rico's anachronistic colonial status, with its US-imposed export/import model of corporate economic development (misnomered “free trade”) that has turned both the island and its inner-city US mainland diaspora into predatory profit incubators for the global narcotics industry. Unable to support themselves in their colony's disarticulated economy, Puerto Rican youth are disproportionately shunted into the riskiest, most visible echelons of the global narcotics market.

THE LEGACY OF CHRONIC INCARCERATION: LITTLE BROTHER LEO

Puerto Rico's bleak, ongoing colonial history in 2021 is the invisible driving structural political economy force generating the tremendous human burden of useless suffering on US inner-city streets that we are documenting ethnographically. We watched helplessly as this played out in the life of Tito's little brother, Leo, when he turned eighteen. He ambitiously followed in the footsteps of his older brother, whom he admired. Immediately upon Tito's incarceration, Leo took full responsibility for the outstanding rent owed on his brother's former corner. He put out his own new “stamp” of heroin, and it sold like hotcakes. Four months later Leo, like his brother, was in jail, awaiting trial for shooting one of his employees. As an overly precocious teenager way out of his league, like his brother, he had overreached in pursuit of fledgling bichote status. Surrounded by guns, money, cash, and an abundant supply of potent cocaine- and fentanyl-laced heroin, he overreacted to the pressure of being bullied, threatened, and disrespected by the slightly older and tougher peers he was attempting to discipline as his

retail sellers. In the anxious boredom of his jail cell, Leo reflected for long hours on why he had pulled the trigger. He was honestly befuddled over how he could have so stupidly shot a street-smart neighbor when all he had meant to do was intimidate him into returning \$500 worth of a “misplaced” stash of narcotics.

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 his heroin's brand name to passersby]. And when I go back, the work [supply of cocaine and 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 nothin'” . . . this-an'-that. Then he wanted to get all hype, so he called his peoples: Bobo, Bambam, Ninito . . . 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] I don't know, everything was just moving so fast, like. [His voice cracking] I ain't really know what to do. I was gonna smack the shit out of him. But he kept talking. I raised my hand at him but he dipped back.

And all his peoples was standin' there, I was thinkin' in my head, like [setting his face into a threatening frown], “Damn, if one of his peoples got a gun. . . .” And Adrian like [taunting voice]. “You a nut-ass n—! You ain't gonna be treating me like a nut.” . . . This-an'-that . . .

I'm like, “What!” And I pulled the jawn out.

But he was just like, “N—, you not gonna do shit.” And he came at me. So I shot him, but just 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.

Afterward, from my crib I had called one of his peoples. He told me they found the dope and I told him, “Look, when Adrian get better, we could rumble [fist fight].”

But they told me Adrian was like almost dying in the hospital 'cause the bullet almost hit his main artery. I'm thinking in the back of my head, “Damn, I didn't want all that to happen. . . . I just did some dumb shit.”

Next thing I know, the police come running up in my crib. “Where the gun at?” And started rippin’ the house apart.

Six months later Leo was in shackles awaiting transfer to a western Pennsylvania prison on a five- to ten-year, plea-bargained sentence. As an eighteen-year-old he was objectively terrified that he would find himself cycling through prison for the rest of his life, trapped in the dead-end logic of the inner-city narcotics market in which he had tried so hard to be an overachiever.

Like his brother Tito, he was acutely aware of the structural forces propelling him to self-destruction. Terrified, as a high school dropout who had never held a legal job in his life, with a predicate felony record that extended back into his early adolescence, all he could do is blame himself for being “weak-minded”:

LEO: There’s old-ass people in here with white hairs. And them n—s 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.

’Cause 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.

THE DENSE POSTADOLESCENT SOCIALITY OF INNER-CITY CONCRETE KILLING FIELDS

If being in prison was a scary prospect, being on the street had been just as terrifying for Leo. On another one of our prison visits, he expressed ambivalent relief about having been incarcerated just in time to save his life. “If I wasn’t in this predicament I probably would’ve got killed, not even knowing that they was looking for me to kill me.” In an emotional confessional outpouring—barely stopping for breath—Leo poured out the dizzying details of multiple overlapping murders and threats of murder among his

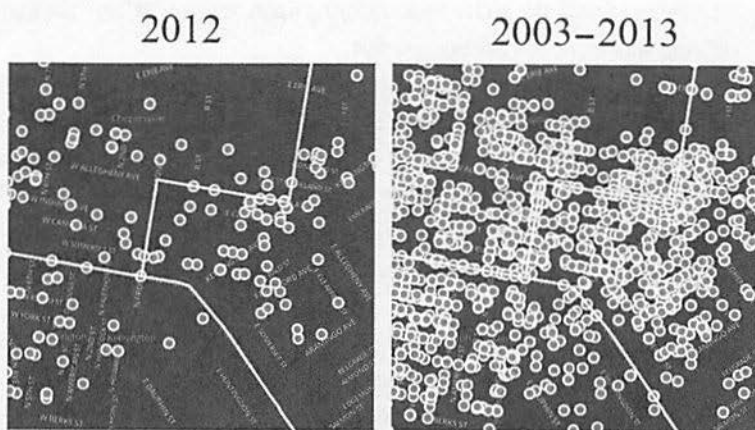


FIGURE 10.1 Shootings in the dozen square blocks surrounding our apartment.

close-knit peer group of late-teenage and early-twenties wannabe-bichotes. They were trapped in the fickle camaraderie of their early childhood rider relationships that now embroiled them in murderous conflicts, with often contradictory obligations for assistive violence across crisscrossing friendships that were polarized by immature and ill-coordinated jockeying for fragile control of corners, or derailed by momentary acts of jealous rage over jilted love.

It is impossible to keep track of the tumble of names of victims and perpetrators in Leo's account. Touchingly, despite their premature transition into early adulthood as bona fide lethal gangsters, both victims and perpetrators still bear the affectionate diminutive baby boy nicknames bestowed on them by their mothers and grandmothers when they were—not so long ago—adorable toddlers. Their nicknames resonate as an objective linguistic trace of the tragedy of growing up too poor, too fast, amid too many guns, drugs, and chronic unemployment. What should have been drug-addled impulsive postadolescent petty squabbles exploded into irrevocable acts of murder. Each shooting or insult traps a wider net of these highly sociable and ambitious young men into obligations of solidary, rider violence. Figure 10.1 illustrates graphically the statistical tragedy of excessive access to unlicensed, inexpensive automatic weapons, primarily among postadolescents scrambling for cash and prestige through retail drug sales. In a collaboration with epidemiologists drawing on publicly available law enforcement firearm violence data, we calculated that Puerto

Ricans in Philadelphia had a six times higher rate of firearm deaths than whites and a 1.3 times higher rate than African Americans. In our immediate neighborhood, the per capita firearm death rate was even worse, a mind-boggling 59 percent higher than the city's overall Puerto Rican average (Friedman et al. 2019).

These murder rate disparities come alive in Leo's tear-choked account of the firearm violence that landed him in jail. He begins—almost as a non sequitur—with two additional unrelated, mistaken-identity violent emergency life threats crashing down on him at the time of his arrest. Gordo, an older, big-time narcotics supplier had put out a \$50,000 murder contract on Leo's head when two kilos of coke “came up missing” from Gordo's garage. Gordo was a former boyfriend of Leo's mother, and Leo had eagerly run errands for him. As an adult Leo remained affectionately respectful of Gordo, and frequently passed by his house to say hello. Unfortunately, one of those casual visits coincided with the timing of the two stolen kilos.

LEO: But Gordo not my only problem. I was chillin' with Wiwi in his new car and we see my bols Dito and Nano in the Crown Vic [car]. Dito jump out, “Yo, let me get the gun, let me get the gun.” Wiwi give him the ratchet, and Dito jump back into the car.

Twenty minutes later all you hear is bam, bam, bam, bam. And Dito come back around. He chillin', “Yeah, I just shot bitch-ass Lolo, because he wanna be smacking my baby mom. I hope that n— die.”

I'm like thinking, “Damn! You a vicious bol, Dito. You crazy!” And that n— look innocent as a motherfucker with his hazel eyes, but he got the devil in him, for real! Dito shot Lolo six times. But Lolo didn't die and he didn't tell [the police] on Dito. He just walked in that bol's garage and shot him in front of everybody.

And Izzi too, that bol always be smilin'. He got big-ass teeth, just a funny-lookin' goofy-ass n—. But he one of the n—s that don't play either. He took his own man out on Somerset with a .357 [Magnum], and it wasn't over no bread, it was over some beef, “Oh, you tried to holler at my girl. . . .”

They was walking and Izzi played cool with his bol and pulled back, and let his bol walk ahead of him. Now he's doin' life upstate. My other bol Litito got kilt over nothin' too. It was just the tension. . . . Words got thick.

Leo then reenacted a phone call he had received a week before his arrest from a close friend warning him that he and two of their other mutual

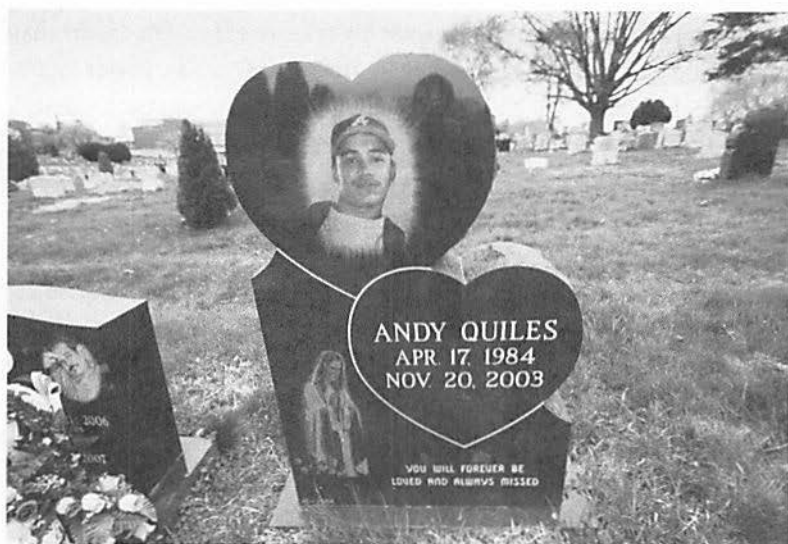


FIGURE 10.2 North Philadelphia cemetery.

friends were out to kill him. A few days earlier, bored, Leo had again inadvertently provoked their lethal anger by going cruising with an acquaintance simply to pass the time of day. Unbeknownst to Leo, that acquaintance was competing for control of the drug corner employing several of Leo's friends. When those friends saw Leo passing by in their rival's car, they assumed Leo was riding for an enemy of their bichote, Chinito:

LEO: [Imitating a gruff voice] "Why you lookin' to kill Chinito?" I'm like [confused voice], "What you mean?" [Gruff voice again] "Oh, then, why you runnin' around with a n— that lookin' for [trying to kill] Chinito?"

I told him [frustrated tone], "What's up with that nut-ass shit! Y'all don't communicate. I didn't know nothin' about Chinito! I didn't know ya'll n—s was goin' through shit. Next time, let a n— know somethin' before I get shot for no reason!"

[Gruff voice again] "Alright. But Chinito's lookin' to kill you. And Lolo lookin' too. And I'm just keepin' it real, I was slidin' through your block every day 'cause I was tryna' check you out [plan your murder] too."

George and Fernando, who were visiting Leo on this occasion, sat back in the uncomfortable plastic chairs of the jail's visiting room, exhausted by the high stakes of teenage intrigue, evocatively punctuated by a dizzying

swirl of baby boy nicknames. They did not know how to respond. Before they had a chance to restabilize their emotions, Leo poured out two more stories of even more horrific recent internecine shootings that had occurred in the past few months among his childhood friends. Despite Leo's self-reflexive critique of the senselessness of "bein' kilt over nothin' nut-ass shit," and "words got thick," the primary lesson he drew from the kaleidoscope of deadly gun violence engulfing everyone around him was his need for more firepower, and his employee became the next collateral damage.:

LEO: I don't wanna be caught slippin'. You can't let people think you sweet [weak]. That's why I was carrying my gun on me all day.

He had also been stalking Gordo, "the bol who had put \$50,000 on me":

LEO: I used to go to his [Gordo's] girl's crib every night, strapped up, ready to kill him. But he never showed up. I kept it on the tip [secret]. 'Cause if he know I know, he gonna be more of a fuckin' Jedi about killin' me first.

George purposefully shifted the conversation to the easy accessibility of firearms in the inner city by asking Leo where he had obtained this last gun, opening the Pandora's box of gun fetishism among adolescent males in neighborhoods flooded with cheap, unlicensed, and very powerful automatic weapons. Leo's intimate account might initially appear to register sociopathic levels of irrational interpersonal deadly violence, but it is important to link this murderous mayhem to the political economy undergirding it and to identify specific public policies and corporate actors: the "predatory accumulation" logic (Bourgois 2018) of the global small firearms industry which lobbies (mostly right-wing) US politicians against commonsensical gun-control laws. In other words the white collar legal activities of the firearm corporations and rightwing politicians (to invoke Appel's (2019) work on the "licit economy" of oil and mining corporations devastating the natural resources and economy of equatorial Africa) are the most proximate force propelling high rates of murder and suicide in the United States. Both legal and illegal firearms trafficking follow the same paths, in the reverse direction, as illegal drug traffic. The United States also has the highest rate of automatic small-firearm ownership in the world. Once again, the formal colonial status of Puerto Rico imposes this the murderous mayhem on its population, situating it geographically, juridically, and economically as a profitable conduit for "free flow" of US small fire-arms both locally and

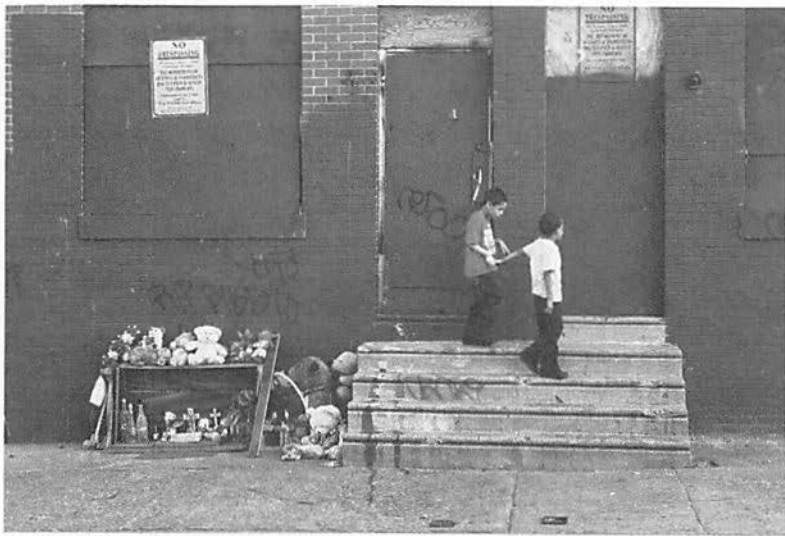


FIGURE 10.3 Half-brothers at the memorial to their father, who was shot on their block.

throughout the rest of Latin America, the Caribbean, and beyond. The island of Puerto Rico bears the tragic burden of having the highest proportion of homicides committed by firearms of any nation in the world (96 percent in the 2010s) simply because it is a conduit for both legal and illegal trafficking of US small firearms along with narcotics (Geneva Small Arms Survey 2012; Bourgois 2015). Again, Leo's relationship to corporately propagated firearm violence is an extension of the logic of colonial injustice affecting the Puerto Rican diaspora on the US mainland that finds itself confined to enclaves overwhelmed by narcotics markets. Poignantly for Leo, these deadly, structurally imposed risks are intimately embedded in his childhood friendship-based social networks.

LEO: I bought the jawn [weapon] off one of my homies. It was a big-ass chrome forty [.40 mm]. I put \$300 and my bol Freddo put \$300. We was sharin' it. It was real cheap 'cause somebody probably already done did something [killed someone] with it.

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. Later I sold it to Benny 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 nine [9 mm] . . . a forty. . . ." And, I'm like [eyes lighting up], "I need that!"

GEORGE: You like guns too much.

LEO: [Nodding] 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 [burying his face in his hands as tears well up].

**CONCLUSION: THE LICIT AND ILLICIT POLITICAL ECONOMY OF
PREDATORY ACCUMULATION PROPELLING PROFITS IN US INNER-
CITY NARCOTICS MARKETS**

In the United States, we tend to blame violent, addictive, or socially destructive behavior on the individual victims who engage in it, framing population-level behaviors as "poor choices." Indeed, young men like Leo and Tito in North Philadelphia also share in the reproduction of this symbolic violence, blaming themselves for their incarceration and murderous acts. From a social science perspective it is more accurate, and from a practical policy and political/humanitarian outcome perspective more productive, to situate their destructive behaviors in the historically grounded structural context that constrains their life chances growing up in such infrastructurally devastated neighborhoods, devoid of legal employment and overrun by narcotics and firearms. They find themselves trapped in a destructive dead end. Unemployed Puerto Ricans living both on the island of Puerto Rico and in its US mainland inner-city diasporas are burdened with what needs to be recognized as politically imposed suffering.

More immediately, as we framed the problem in the introduction, the fourfold punch of high rates of firearm injury, substance-use disorders, mental/physical disabilities, and the "mass incarceration"—or more accurately "hyper-incarceration" of poor urban African Americans and Latinos (Wacquant 2010), are specific policy outcomes that can be changed. The United States imprisons more of its inhabitants than any nation ever has in all of world history. US gun control policies are so dysfunctional that inner-city streets are flooded with automatic weapons that sell at well below their market rate and no doubt often well below their cost of production. Overcrowded carceral facilities are objectively institutionally brutal. They turn rageful interpersonal violence into a necessity for survival and self-respect. They also decrease the social capital and employability of inmates.

“Ex-offenders” stained by their felony and misdemeanor carceral records enter the legal labor market at a tremendous disadvantage. Desperate to support themselves and find some kind of esteem, they often slide back into the highest-risk, lowest-level echelons of the global narcotics industry’s retail labor force. On inner-city streets, the state’s response of punitive law enforcement and zero tolerance for drugs, exacerbated by racial profiling and police brutality, ironically fails to protect the physical security of inner-city residents. As a result, the violently enforced *pax narcotica* of bichotes metamorphoses their profitable brutality into what appears to be virtuous power. They maintain provisional order in an environment of systemic precarity. Neighbors, consequently, find themselves obliged to seek out their block’s bichotes as the only available brokers capable of reducing the violent collateral fallout of their narcotics profiteering. Norbert Elias’s landmark analysis of how a “civilizing process” heralded the emergence of the modern European state (Elias 1978) has been turned on its head by South American political theorists in the “era of predatory accumulation” (Bourgois 2018), whereby punitive warlordism, narcotics racketeering, and environmental disaster become business-as-usual (Bourgois 2018). The state becomes a “de-civilizing” or “de-pacification” force (O’Donnell 1993; Arias 2006; Goldstein 2004; Auyero and Berti 2015) that decreases the security of civil society and turns substance-use disorders, repression, and disability into profits extracted from the inner-city poor, legal taxpayers, and from the premature death of vulnerable populations. Although the specifics of police corruption, physical insecurity, and state repression differ dramatically between the US and Latin America nations, in the US the routinization of police brutality, malfeasance, and especially mass incarceration is a central force sustaining crime, violence, and plentiful cheap narcotics inside US inner cities.

Youth on the street are seduced into bichote dreams because the war on drugs vastly inflates profit margins. They struggle for a piece of the pie through expressive performances of lethal violence. For ambitious young men like Tito and Leo, the classic second-generation immigrant’s American dream of upward mobility through intrepid entrepreneurship backfire into an ‘Amerikan’ nightmare of destructive cycles of violence that they reproduce even as they also insightfully condemn them. Incarcerated as teenagers, they strive to pick themselves up by their bootstraps in their early twenties, but stumble on the reality of their exclusion from the legal labor market and backslide into substance-use disorders, or as they put it, “my addiction to money.” On a structural level, they have become superflu-

ous, legal labor power. Their irrelevance to the productive, wage-earning, legal economy comes crashing down on them:

LEO: I just don't want to go back to the same nut shit when I get home. 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.

EPILOGUE

As this article goes to press, Leo is serving time in a federal penitentiary for gun possession, and his older brother Tito couch surfs between his mother's and his girlfriend's houses, in and out of stints of narcotics sales and occasional day labor jobs in demolition construction work.

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