

1 Coming of Age in the Concrete Killing Fields of the US Inner City
2

3 It wasn't even supposed to happen like that. I was gonna smack him... but
4 he kept talking. I wasn't even gonna shoot him, but it just happened too fast man. I
5 don't know... This the dumbest thing I ever did in my life.

6 --18 year-old Leo, in county jail after shooting a disrespectful drug seller
7

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10

11 Philippe's Fieldnote:

12 Raffy, the *bichote*¹ is out on the corner tonight and invites Tito and me to
13 sit next to him on the stoop of an abandoned row home. Tito is Raffy's
14 "caseworker," the local term for a bichote's second-in-command who is
15 responsible for managing the shifts of sellers and look-outs on a corner. We are
16 surrounded by a half-dozen of his off-and-on-duty heroin and cocaine sellers,
17 wannabe sellers, and teenage and pre-teenage bored kids who are all eager--like
18 me--to be around the big shot boss. When he shows up on the block, Raffy is the
19 nexus for action, money, power, potential and risk. He is also the only provider of
20 local employment in this desolate neighborhood.

21 A police car cruises slowly down the block. We all tense up and avoid eye
22 contact despite trying to look bored and indifferent. As the patrol car nears, the
23 passenger-side officer rolls down his window and yells out, "Betta get off the
24 block right now Fatass!" Raffy jumps to his feet, muttering "Dickhead!" His
25 riposte--meant for our ears only--is, however, a little too loud. The officer jumps
26 out of the car, flushes red, and slaps his baton in his palm. "I heard that, Fatass.
27 Get the fuck outta here right now! A bunch of people I locked up been telling me
28 about you. [Shouting] Go home Bitch!"

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

40 Spittle flying from his mouth, the officer blushes a deeper red and belts
41 out another slew of "Fatasses" and "Bitches". The outraged officer trails him,
42 sputtering, "I'll fight you right now... Right now." He re-holsters his baton and
43 attempts to pump his fists to match Raffy's challenge, but like Raffy he is
44 extremely overweight, and his belly breaks through his uniform bursting over his

¹ Bichote is a Puerto Rican Spanglish double entendre for both a big drug boss and a big phallus from "big shot" and "bicho".

1 holster-belt laden with pistol, tazer, baton, walkie-talkie and other bulky
2 accessories. The crowd roars with more laughter and someone starts chanting,
3 "Dickhead! Dickhead!"

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

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

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

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

36 The crowd's solidary presence and cell-phone filming has saved Raffy
37 from the standard retaliatory scenarios of such confrontational arrests: a sprained
38 handcuffed-wrist, a dislocated shoulder, a concussed head "accidentally"
39 slammed on the police car's doorframe or roof, or just a routine police beat-down.

40 The irate officer is on a roll now. He spins around to sprint after Wiwi, a
41 16-year-old wheelchair-bound hustler who is making the mistake of trying to rush
42 to his home around the corner. Wiwi has a sunset "curfew condition" imposed on
43 him from an arrest earlier this week and the moon is already full in the dark sky.
44 The officer grabs the right handle of Wiwi's wheelchair and drags him to the far
45 side of the patrol car which has been flung open by another officer. He tries to
46 throw the disabled adolescent directly from his chair into the back seat next to

1 Raffy, but Wiwi is wearing a seat belt and the entire chair lifts into the air. Both
2 the officer and the disabled adolescent curfew violator fall backwards on the
3 pavement to more of the crowd's laughs.

4 Several adult on-lookers have now raised their voices above the chorus of
5 "Dickheads," to protest, "Nah nah, Officer! He ain't doin' nothin'. He's just going
6 home. The young bol² lives right here [Pointing to the far corner]." The cop yells
7 back, "I got every right to arrest him! I got him right here last week with bundles
8 [14 packs of heroin] on him..." Wiwi adds his cracking voice to the melee, "You
9 got no right to arrest me in front of my own house." The officer laughs, "You
10 cried like a little bitch in your cell last week. You gonna cry again now?" Wiwi
11 has, indeed, burst into flowing tears of rage.

12 Wiwi's mother pushes through the crowd, asking in a surprisingly calm
13 but loud voice, "What seems to be the problem officer?" Without pausing for a
14 response she turns to Wiwi and raises her hand as if to slap him, but instead yells
15 in Spanish, "*Callate hijo* [shut-up son]." That appears to calm the officer down.

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

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

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

30 Only minutes after the police have left, the usual stream of customers--
31 most of them white--is unsteadily flowing by again, cash in hand. Many of the
32 addicts look like the walking-war-wounded, or rather like emaciated Auschwitz
33 survivors on the final death march, covered in scabs and rags. A young white man
34 with a white blood-stained bandage wrapped around his forehead bargains with
35 Tito to exchange a "9 millimeter glock" for "a bundle of dope and a bundle of
36 powder."

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

44 The hothead ripostes, "Nah, they just angry at us 'cause we the outlaws
45 and they can't be." Tito cracks-up laughing and slaps him a high five. A customer

² "Bol" is inner-city Philadelphia slang for young man.

1 walks up and they go right back to business, selling, play-boxing, and rolling
2 blunts. Clouds of marijuana waft into the chill of the late autumn night air as
3 dollars and dope pass rapidly from hand to hand.

4 **The punitive mismanagement of inner city poverty**

5 A sympathetic judge dismissed the bogus assault charges filed by the wannabe-Rocky
6 officer and Raffy immediately returned to the block to take back control of sales from his
7 caseworker Tito. He started hanging out even more conspicuously, generously treating his sellers
8 and the neighbors to sodas and *hoagies*. Tito, meanwhile, strategically quit as Raffy's second-in-
9 command as soon as the humiliated police started raiding every day, several times a day. Within
10 two weeks Raffy was arrested on drug charges two more times and a notoriously draconian judge
11 sentenced him to a completely unanticipated sentence of 12.5 to 25 years in prison, for having
12 violated his probation on a previous outstanding narcotics sales conviction compounded by the
13 two new arrests. Meanwhile, another bichote, Panama Red, newly released from prison, well-
14 known for "liking to play with guns," burst onto the scene and took over. Wary of the police,
15 however, Panama Red strategically stepped back and rented out the corner for \$5,000 a week to a
16 subcontractor, yet another ambitious wannabe bichote from the neighborhood who, sure enough,
17 was arrested four months later.

18 The tempo of arrests then inexplicably slowed down as it always did in the mysterious
19 sudden ebb and flows of demoralized and incompetent inner-city police narcotics offensives. In
20 Philadelphia, as in many large cities across the country, narcotics units are purposefully rotated
21 out of neighborhoods every few weeks or months to prevent the institutionalization of petty
22 corruption. The easy money and artificially high profits associated with illegal drugs render
23 fragile the boundary between criminal perpetrator and law enforcement agent. The Philadelphia
24 newspapers documented dozens of egregious police corruption as well as brutality scandals
25 during our fieldwork years, including a Pulitzer Prize winning series on one of the narcotics
26 teams rotating through our micro neighborhood (Ruderman and Laker 2014; Denvir 2013). In
27 2017 the head District Attorney of the city was indicted on corruption and bribery-related
28 charges (Roebuck 2017).

29 Reassured that the police offensive had finally ended, Panama Red took over direct
30 control of sales on the block. He hired two new caseworkers, one for the day shift and the other
31 from the graveyard shift. For the next eighteen months, Panama Red managed to keep the block
32 open 24/7 in a stealthy cat-and-mouse dance with incompetent police raids that arrested only the
33 addicted customers and the lowest level sellers.

34 **Scrambling for upward mobility on the corner**

35 Seasoned bichotes usually avoid spending time at their drug sales points lest they attract
36 police attention or expose themselves to attacks by rivals. Consequently, we were initially
37 baffled by Raffy's provocative response to the abusive police officer. We were even more
38 shocked when Raffy had dared to continue to hanging out so visibly at his sales spot, despite the
39 likelihood of police revenge after his Rocky-challenge arrest. At the time we did not yet
40 understand the economic, cultural and personal stakes propelling Raffy to take such spectacular
41 risks. We later learned that Raffy's performative visibility and risk taking had been a desperate
42 attempt to charismatically retain his fragile control of his valuable territory. It turned out that he
43 was under active siege not only by Panama Red, who ultimately seized control, but also by an
44 estranged partner, Lucas, who had formerly been in charge of supplying the cocaine. We also did
45 not yet understand the culturally-inscribed necessity for having a long-term credible reputation
46 for violence and hyper-masculine courage in order to mobilize supporters, called "riders", in

1 Philadelphia slang, for back-up in times of conflicts. Equally important was the need to impress
2 neighbors who otherwise might be tempted to serve as informants to the police.

3 Bichotes, caseworkers and even entry-level sellers cultivate obligations for assistive
4 violence among networks of riders as a protection against future victimization. Rider
5 relationships also have a pragmatic material valence. In the absence of public state legal services
6 and sanctions for mediating economic disputes peacefully the ability to mobilize a handful of
7 loyal violent minions is the best way to enforce cash-only contracts in the multi-billion dollar
8 narcotics industry. Peace, however, is also good for business: it imposes the longer-term
9 modicum of stability necessary for attracting a steady flow of customers and it keeps the police
10 at bay. Ironically, therefore, one's reputation for being able to mobilize violence simultaneously
11 imposes prompt payments of debts, enforces labor discipline, ensures product purity, attracts
12 customers, and reduces one's chance of arrest (Karandinos et al. 2014; Bourgois 1989). On our
13 block on days when the police did not raid, 100 "bundles" (each consisting of fourteen \$10
14 packets of heroin, usually weighing 0.03 grams), were frequently sold during a single shift. In
15 other words, on many--if not most--days some \$14,000 worth of cash in untraceable ten-dollar
16 bills was changing hands without a single dollar going missing every eight to fourteen hours on
17 the poorest Philadelphia street corners such as ours.

18 **Fieldwork and the neighborhood historical context**

19 This whirlwind succession of bichote arrests and successions occurred early into the more
20 than six year participant observation fieldwork project (2007-2015) we carried out as a team in
21 the poorest corner of Philadelphia's Puerto Rican inner city which has been a 40-to-60 square
22 block sprawling, post-industrial landscape of open air narcotics markets since at least the 1980s
23 (Richards 1994; Mars et al. 2014; Roman et al. 2006; Zucchini 1992). We rented an apartment
24 on a block with an active sales point and socialized with our neighbors, hanging out on stoops, in
25 homes and at the sales points. We accompanied the sellers through the criminal justice system
26 and visited them in jail. Our two collaborators, George Karandinos, who was an undergraduate
27 student at the University of Pennsylvania at the time, and Fernando Montero a recent college
28 graduate from Costa Rica, both lived in the apartment for over four and three years respectively
29 and we visited regularly, often staying the night.

30 The neighborhood is the former 19th century industrial heartland of Philadelphia. Its
31 infrastructure has been devastated since the 1980s by public and private sector abandonment,
32 leaving it riddled with abandoned factories, decaying row homes, vacant lots, defunct railroad
33 lines and random piles of rubble and garbage. Ironically, Puerto Ricans began immigrating in
34 large numbers to Philadelphia in the 1950s seeking factory employment precisely when the city's
35 manufacturing sector was beginning its precipitous decline. Manufacturing jobs in the city
36 dropped more than twelve fold between the early 1950s and the mid 2000s. During our fieldwork
37 years, there were virtually no legal businesses offering any significant source of legal
38 employment within 10 blocks of our apartment, and almost half of the households in our census
39 tract had annual incomes below the US Federal Poverty Line. The multibillion dollar global
40 narcotics industry had flooded into this economic vacuum during the crack epidemic of the late
41 1980s, and then stabilized as the price of heroin dropped and its purity rose through the 1990s
42 and 2000s--wrecking havoc along its path (Bourgois 2003). Unemployed, second-generation
43 Puerto Rican immigrants as well as new-arrivals fleeing even more extreme poverty and violence
44 on their natal island filled the entry level rungs of this highly profitable, but high-risk retail
45 endpoint of the global narcotics industry. Unemployed youth growing up on our block found
46 themselves selling high quality inexpensive heroin and cocaine to primarily white customers in

1 the shadows of factories that used to employ their grandparents. Their lives and those of their
2 families were devastated by an aggressive state response of chronic incarceration and
3 incompetent law enforcement violence that further compounded the routinized occupational
4 injuries of addiction and interpersonal violence.

5 Drawing from several thousand pages of fieldwork notes and transcriptions of interviews,
6 we are trying to make sense of the maelstrom of deadly violence engulfing the young men we
7 befriended. We are interested in linking the intimate experience of violence in the US inner city
8 to the larger political economic and historical forces that turn US inner cities into concrete killing
9 fields. These forces include, most importantly, 1) a form of neoliberal globalization and
10 financialization that has dramatically increased income inequality, 2) narcotics monopoly profits
11 that are artificially elevated by illegality, 3) a global arms industry that thrives on ineffective US
12 gun control laws, and, most visibly, 4) the carceral management of racialized poverty and
13 unemployment. What follows is an account of how these forces play out in the lives of two
14 brothers, Tito (Raffy's caseworker in the opening fieldnote) and Tito's little brother Leo, as they
15 both came of age on our block. From their perspective, they were ambitiously seizing the only
16 'actually existing' opportunities for a sliver of the American Dream in the segregated inner city
17 into which they were born.

18 **Territorial control and 'virtuous power'**

19 We documented nearly a dozen bichote transitions within our micro-neighborhood during
20 our five years of fieldwork. These territorial successions became pressure cookers for violent
21 confrontations that sometimes lasted several weeks or months with multiple rivals jockeying for
22 control. The violent reputation and depth of rider relationships that each aspiring bichote was
23 capable of mobilizing during these transition periods were crucial to the outcome. Successful
24 bichotes, however, could not rely on brute force alone. Their longevity ultimately hinged on their
25 ability to be recognized as a respected "leader among equals". They needed to cultivate a
26 hegemony of "virtuous power"³ by reinforcing their territorial control with continuous and
27 innumerable sociable, charismatic assertions of aggression and generosity. The most resilient
28 bichotes interspersed their acts of expressive brutality--including, in Raffy's case, recklessly
29 brave displays of comic self-respect--with performances of humility and generosity.

30 Had Raffy not been imprisoned of a 12.5 to 25 year sentence, he would likely have
31 maintained his power because he was respected by the neighbors. They admired him for
32 preferring brave displays of old fashioned fisticuffs rather than the spectacular, terrifying gun-
33 play that Panama Red and many other bichotes favored. Tito also clearly respected Raffy for this
34 blunt physical courage and proved it by loyally siding with him as his rider during the three way
35 divide-and-conquer tug-of-war between Panama Red, Raffy and Lucas even though he had
36 strategically quit as caseworker to avoid arrest.

37 **Tito:** First, Panama Red's bols started taking the coke off of Lucas'
38 sellers. Raffy was ready to fight but Lucas didn't want to ride and he started
39 bitchin' to Raffy, 'I'm just going to pay rent to Panama Red.'

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

³ We thank Andres Antillano for his commentary on the virtuous power of the gang leaders who control Venezuelan prisons.

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

4 Lucas got powdered up [high on cocaine] and came out the house at Raffy
5 with his AK. At first he had the jawn⁴ pointed to the side and Raffy was like, 'Yo
6 nigga don't point that shit at me.' But Lucas, I guess he had some courage from all
7 that powder, and kept it pointed at Raffy, and that nigga started dancing. Like, 'Oh
8 shit!--Ducking around, scared as hell, ready to dive.

9 Reenacting the scene, Tito opened his eyes wide and feigned a terrified adrenaline rush.
10 He hopped from foot-to-foot, rocked his body, waved his arms, and shook his head.

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

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

18 **Violence and incarceration: Tito's experience**

19 None of this turmoil dissuaded Tito from his ambitions, for upward mobility.

20 **Tito:** I don't even know what stamp [brand name of heroin] Panama Red's
21 peoples be sellin' because the cops have been raidin' and I've gone up the food
22 chain puttin' out my own work [drugs] on a corner over there now [motioning
23 vaguely towards one of the active blocks parallel to us].

24 Tito had seized a new opportunity that opened up when the bichote on a neighboring
25 corner was suddenly shot dead by the little brother of one of his caseworkers whom the slain
26 bichote had failed to bail out after an arrest. The bichote's widow trusted Tito, having known him
27 since he was a little boy. She also needed to act fast because one of her late husband's cousins
28 was trying to take over the block by force. She offered Tito a low rent, only \$500 a week--a tenth
29 of what Panama Red received from his new renter on our block. Tito partnered with a friend who
30 owned a brand new .357 Magnum and they eagerly agreed to the deal promising the widow to
31 defend her corner from her cousin-in-law and pay the rent faithfully. Business immediately
32 boomed only to come crashing to an end almost immediately when Tito accidentally killed his
33 new partner in a drunken and benzodiazepine-addled celebration of their three month anniversary
34 as fledgling bichotes renting a bargain-priced drug corner. The judge, another notorious hard-
35 liner, initially charged Tito with homicide carrying a 17-to-34 year sentence, despite the fact that
36 everyone--including the arresting police officers--knew the shooting was a genuine accident, and
37 should have qualified Tito for a much shorter involuntary manslaughter charge of 2.5 to 5 years.

38 We visited Tito in the County Jail on multiple occasions. On the first visit, Tito walked
39 into the visitor's room with his face covered in scratches and raised his shirt to reveal a deep
40 crimson circular bruise in the center of his chest:

41 **Tito:** I just got in a fight with some black bol and look, the motherfucker
42 bit me! We had words earlier at the phones, and he kept runnin' his mouth. But I
43 let it go. I wanted to be peaceful, you know, I have a lot on my mind. I have to go
44 to court tomorrow. But the nigga came into my cell and [making a punching

⁴ In Philadelphia slang "jawn" is an indefinite referential noun. Its meaning is inferred from the context of a conversation--in this sentence jawn stands in for Lucas' AK-47 machine gun.

1 motion] snuck me in the back of the head. Then he stood there lookin' at me like I
2 wasn't gonna' do nothin'. Like I'm a pussy.

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

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

10 The over four-fold explosion in the size of the incarcerated population in the United
11 States since 1980 (Kaebler and Glaze 2016) has turned prisons into de facto gladiator schools that
12 hone the fighting skills of inmates, and sabotage future ability to find legal employment. The
13 structural brutality of overcrowded US jails dramatically raises the stakes for cultivating violent
14 reputations and propagates racist prison gangs as each ethnic group scrambles for self-protection.
15 Prisons oblige inmates to be aggressively violent in order to avoid victimization while
16 simultaneously trapping them in a catch 22 feedback loop of solitary confinement, extended
17 prison sentences and punitive lockdowns. These cycles of fury and frustration are further
18 exacerbated by the institutionalization of arbitrary bullying by often poorly trained, and
19 overwhelmed guards. In Tito's description of his first prison fight, for example, he mentioned
20 with a shrug, "When I saw the bol was trying to stab me I asked the CO [Correctional Officer]
21 'don't lock us in' [i.e. lock us into the cell together] but the CO did anyway."

22 In this context of institutionalized brutality, it is easy to understand why Tito was obliged
23 to fly into a "blind rage" and beat a fellow inmate into a pulp inside his jail cell. Tito is Puerto
24 Rican and, as he points out, "small", in an African-American dominated, overcrowded county
25 jail. As a baby-faced 19 year-old facing a long-term prison sentence, it is imperative for his
26 survival, respect and sanity that he does not become a mark for bullies.

27 Tito had no difficulty identifying the infrastructural context generating such extreme
28 levels of interpersonal violence among his fellow inmates in the punitive maximum-security
29 "lock-down" units. The late nineteenth century French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1982
30 [1895]) would have easily categorized this kind of ostensibly interpersonal, but clearly socially
31 constructed, violence a "social fact". Each individual act appears to be precipitated by the
32 idiosyncrasy of the personalities of the perpetrators but, from a sociological perspective, the
33 systemic phenomenon of massive carceral interpersonal violence cannot usefully be understood
34 as being the "choice" of individuals. From a contemporary theoretical perspective, Tito's fight
35 can be interpreted as a manifestation of "structural violence" (Farmer 2003), "everyday violence"
36 (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004) or "normalized violence" (Bourgois 2010). These
37 theoretical perspectives highlight the invisible forces of political economic inequality and the
38 institutional and bureaucratic bulwarks that generate the highly visible interpersonal criminal
39 violence that has been routinized in the US, a country whose firearm murder rate in 2010 was 10
40 times higher than that of other comparably rich nations (Grinshteyn and Hemenway 2016).

41 Tito was smart. He understood the oppressive effects of structural forces, but his critical
42 insight on punitive overcrowding in US jails did not stop the institutionalized brutality from
43 seeping into his subjectivity and becoming a core component of his conception of masculine self-
44 respect,

45 **Tito:** This unit is crazy man. A lot of people don't know what's going on
46 yet with their case. They stressin'. They have that uncertainty. They don't know if

1 they are going to go home soon, or if they aren't ever goin' home. Plus, we in
2 close custody. They got us on lockdown half the time because of some shanking
3 [stabbing]. There aint' shit to do. You just sit in your cell all day bored and
4 frustrated. That's half the reason there is so many problems. We might kill each
5 other over 10 minutes on the phone. Or hot water in the shower, or whatever.

6 Out in the street I knew how to resolve a situation, you could talk to
7 someone out there and maybe it didn't have to come to any violence. In here there
8 is no choice. You can't just let them treat you like a bitch 'cause then everyone be
9 sayin', 'He a pussy. He ain't gonna do anything.' And walk up in your cell, "Look
10 nigga gimme all that, or I'm'a fuck you up." I done seen it too many times man.

11 No one is going to talk about me like that. All I have in here... [choking
12 back tears] is my pride. I'm not letting nobody take that away from me! And my
13 mama didn't raise no pussy.

14 We were concerned that Tito might not survive in county jail waiting for trial so we
15 sought out Don Luis--a charismatic former bichote who had lived through a 15 year sentence for
16 a road rage murder committed in his early 20s. Against all odds, Don Luis had managed to
17 reintegrate himself into the legal labor market in his early 40s. He prided himself on his
18 redemption as a just-above-minimum-wage, part-time janitor cleaning offices, and he lived
19 proudly on the block with his extended family. He frequently doled out advice to the young
20 street hustlers who respected him for his past history as a successful, violent bichote. We were
21 hoping to persuade Don Luis to call Tito and advise him to refrain from violence, but he cut us
22 short:

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

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

29 It's not just Tito's problem. The black people in the County [jail]--
30 especially the Muslims [a racialized Philadelphia prison gang]--try to take your
31 heart. Can't let them bully you or they're gonna call you Maytag¹. You gonna be
32 washing their underwear, dirty shitty underwear, and then you gonna be givin'
33 that booty up. I seen smaller guys than Tito kill guys real quick during a prison
34 lockdown... Yo! It was a major riot. The whole prison went wild...

35 **The Puerto Rican colonial diaspora and the global drug trade**

36 Out on the street, the stakes provoking high levels of violence on drug corners are most
37 proximally raised by the circulation of automatic weapons, untraceable cash, and monopoly
38 profit margins that are artificially elevated by illegality. Less proximally, but no less important to
39 understanding the specifically Puerto Rican immigrant's vulnerability to violence and narcotics
40 addiction in the inner city, is the island of Puerto Rico's peculiar ongoing colonial relationship to
41 the United States that has high-jacked the Island's political administrative system and
42 disarticulated its economy, expelling over half of its population as cheap wage laborers to the US
43 mainland. Literally driven by hunger, formerly rural unemployed Puerto Ricans emigrated as
44 cheap wage laborers to segregated inner cities like Philadelphia precisely when factories in the
45 mainland US were closing down to take advantage of cheaper, overseas tax-free production sites,
46 creating the phenomenon of the rustbelt cities of the Midwest and Northwest.

1 Formal colonies are an anomaly in the 21st century and represent an international
2 embarrassment to their imperial masters that is periodically condemned in the United Nations.
3 Nevertheless, more than a century after its invasion by US Marines in 1898, Puerto Rico still
4 remained (as of 2017) an "unincorporated overseas territory" of the United States. The Island has
5 no voting rights in Congress, no control of its foreign policy, and severely limited control over its
6 economy. Its population, furthermore, is subject to the US military draft. Puerto Ricans receive
7 the full legal rights of US citizenship only if they take up permanent residence in the US
8 mainland.

9 In the 2000s, Puerto Rico's dysfunctional domestic economy finally imploded. The
10 Island's gross national product began a decade-long decline culminating in 2016 with the US
11 Supreme Court thwarting the Puerto Rican Governor's attempt to file for public sector
12 bankruptcy (Chappatta 2016). The US Congress imposed a seven member "Control Board",
13 nicknamed the "*junta*", to oversee an economic austerity plan that prioritized debt payments to
14 US creditors--including large obligations to multiple hedge and vulture funds--rather than
15 disbursement of social welfare services and retirement pensions for Puerto Rican residents
16 (Walsh 2016: B1). By the end of our fieldwork in the mid-2010s, over 46.2% of Puerto Ricans
17 on the Island lived below the US poverty line--more than three times the US poverty rate. Most
18 importantly, legal labor force participation rates in 2017 dropped to 40%--more than one-third
19 lower than that of the US mainland's rate of 62% (US Department of Labor 2017; Trading
20 Economics 2017), forcing an even higher proportion of the working-age population into an
21 exceptionally violent underground economy. Murder rates on the island of Puerto Rico are
22 approximately five times higher than those on the US mainland (Bourgois 2015).

23 Ironically, it is the peculiarity of Puerto Rico's ongoing colonial status, with its US-
24 imposed free trade-and-travel export/import model of economic development, compounded with
25 the bad luck of the island's strategic geographical location in the Caribbean, which has turned
26 both the Island and its inner city diaspora on the mainland into a profit incubator for the global
27 narcotics industry. A disproportionately large share of out-of-work Puerto Rican youth
28 desperately seeks employment in the workforce of the narcotics industry at its riskiest, inner-city
29 endpoints such as the open air drug markets of Philadelphia where we conducted fieldwork
30 (Rosenblum et al. 2014).

31 **The legacy of chronic incarceration: Little brother Leo**

32 This bleak ongoing colonial history of dispossession manifests on inner-city corners, in
33 the routinized everyday emergency of competition over monopoly drug profits at a great human
34 cost of useless suffering. We watched Tito's little brother, Leo who had only just turned 18,
35 follow ambitiously in the footsteps of his older brother whom he admired so much. He
36 immediately took responsibility for the outstanding rent owed on his brother's former corner and
37 put out his own new "stamp" of heroin. Four months later Leo too was in jail, awaiting trial for
38 shooting one of his employees. As an overly precocious teenager way out of his league, he, like
39 his older brother had climbed too fast into his fledgling bichote status. Surrounded by guns,
40 money and cash he over-reacted to the pressure of being bullied, threatened and disrespected by
41 the slightly older and tougher peers he had hired to work for him. In the anxious boredom of his
42 jail cell Leo reflected for long hours on why he had pulled the trigger. He was honestly
43 befuddled at how he could have so stupidly shot a disrespectful worker when all he had meant to
44 do was intimidate him into returning a \$500 stash of stolen heroin.

45 **Leo:** Oh man, I got into some dumb shit. Real stupid! It was all over
46 some nut-ass shit. I had this young bol, Adrian, out there hustling for me and I

1 went around the corner to advertise my stamp [shout out his heroin's brand name
2 to passersby]. When I go back, the work [cache of drugs] ain't there, so I'm like,
3 "Adrian, damn, you're the only person sittin' here, like, what's up? Where the
4 work go?"

5 [Imitating ostentatious innocence] "Oh, I didn't touch nothin'"... this-an'-
6 that. Then he wanted to get all hype, so he called his peoples--all of his cousins.
7 So I go back to my crib and I grab the strap [gun] and I come back.

8 [Head in his hands his voice cracking] I don't know, everything was just
9 moving so fast, like. I ain't really know what to do. I was gonna smack the shit out
10 of him. But he kept talking. I raised my hand at him but he dipped back.

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

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

16 But he was just like, 'Nigga you not gonna do shit.' And he came at me.

17 So I shot him, but just once so he could get away from me. That was the
18 first time I ever shot somebody. And I thought I was gonna be like hesitant. But I
19 didn't even hesitate. It was just like a spur of the moment thing.

20 Afterwards, from my crib I had called one of his peoples. He told me they
21 found the dope and I told him, "Look, when Adrian get better, we could rumble
22 [first fight]."

23 But they told me Adrian was like almost dying in the hospital 'cause the
24 bullet almost hit his main artery.

25 I'm thinking in the back of my head, 'Damn, I didn't want all that to
26 happen... I just did some dumb shit.'

27 Next thing I know, the police come running up in my crib. 'Where the gun
28 at?' And started rippin' the house apart.

29 Six months later Leo was in shackles awaiting transfer to a western Pennsylvania prison
30 on a 5-to-10 year plea bargained sentence. As an 18 year-old he was objectively terrified that he
31 would find himself cycling through prison for the rest of his life, trapped in the dead-end logic of
32 the inner city narcotics market in which he had tried so hard to be a charismatic overachiever.
33 Like his brother Tito, he was acutely aware of the structural forces propelling him to self-
34 destruction. Terrified, as a high school dropout who had never held a legal job in his life, with a
35 predicate felony record that extended back into his early adolescence, all he could do is blame
36 himself for being "weak":

37 There's old-ass people in here with white hairs. And them niggas ain't
38 changed. You really gotta be strong to change. And I ain't gonna hold [lie to]
39 you, I'm kinda weak in my mind. I get sucked into doing dumb stuff.

40 'Cause it's like a chain reaction. You come home [from prison] and you go
41 back right to the same thing. This lifestyle is just so addictive. Every little thing
42 about it--especially when you got a block. You just wake up and you got money.
43 You walk around the block and your workers passin' you some money. Next
44 thing you know, [cocking his neck as if cradling a cell phone] "Yo, I'm done,
45 come pick this money up." It's so easy. But it don't lead nowhere. Next thing you
46 know you wind up killin' somebody 'cause he tried to kill you and you in this

1 situation [shaking his shackles] ready to do more time. That's why I know I ain't
2 gonna change if I come back to Philly.

3 **The dense post-adolescent sociality of inner-city concrete killing fields**

4 If being in prison was a scary prospect, being on the street was just as terrifying. On
5 another one of our prison visits, Leo expressed ambivalent relief about having been incarcerated
6 just in time to save his life, "If I wasn't in this predicament I probably would've got killed, not
7 even knowing that they was looking for me to kill me." In an emotional confessional outpouring
8 he described--barely stopping for breath--the dizzying details of multiple overlapping murders,
9 and threats of murder among his close-knit post-adolescent peer group of late-teenage and early
10 20s wannabe-bichotes. They were trapped in the fickle camaraderie of his early childhood rider-
11 relationships that were now embroiling them--sometimes inadvertently--into contradictory
12 obligations for assistive violence across crisscrossing friendships that were polarized by ill-
13 coordinated jockeying for fragile control of corners or derailed by momentary acts of jealous
14 rage over jilted love.

15 It was impossible to keep track of the names of the victims and the perpetrators in his
16 account. Tellingly, despite their transition into early adulthood as bonafide lethal gangsters, both
17 the victims and the perpetrators still bore the affectionate diminutive baby boy nicknames
18 bestowed on them by their mothers and grandmothers when they were adorable toddlers,
19 freezing in time an objective linguistic mark of the tragedy of having grown up poor and too fast
20 amidst guns, drugs and chronic unemployment. What was often just a series of drug-addled
21 impulsive or paranoid serendipitous miscommunications and petty squabbles became irrevocable
22 acts of murder, turning the neighborhood into a killing field. Each shooting or insult traps a
23 wider net of these sociable young men into obligations of solidary, rider violence. [Note to editor
24 if Figure 1 can't be used edit next sentence] Figure 1 illustrates graphically the tragedy of easy
25 access to unlicensed inexpensive automatic weapons in post-adolescent networks of small-time
26 drug sellers such as Leo and his buddies.

27 Leo began with a story of a \$50,000 contract that Gordo, an older, big time supplier had
28 put on his head when two kilos of coke "came up missing" from Gordo's garage. Gordo was a
29 former boyfriend of Leo's mother, and Leo, as a child, had often run errands for him. As an adult
30 Leo sometimes passed by Gordo's house just to say hello and unfortunately one of those casual
31 visits coincided with the timing of the stolen kilos.

32 **Leo:** But Gordo's not my only problem. I was chillin' with Wiwi and I see
33 my bols Izzi and Nano, come to the block in the Crown Vic [car] and Dito jump
34 out, "Yo, let me get the gun, let me get the gun." Wiwi gave him the gun, and
35 Dito jump back into the car.

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

39 I'm like thinking, "Damn! You a vicious bol Dito. You crazy!" And that
40 nigga look innocent as a motherfucker with his hazel eyes, but he got the devil in
41 him, for real! Dito shot Lolo six times.

42 But Lolo didn't die and he didn't tell on Dito. He just walked in that bol's
43 garage and shot him in front of everybody.

44 [Optional INSERT about here Figure 1 Firearm violence in the dozen square blacks
45 surrounding our block]

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

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

8 Leo then proceeded to re-enact a phone call he had received a week before his arrest from
9 a close friend warning him that two of their other mutual friends were out to kill him. A few days
10 earlier, bored, Leo had gone cruising in a friend's fancy new car to pass the time of day.
11 Unbeknownst to Leo, however, at that moment his friend was competing for control of a drug
12 corner operated by several of Leo's other friends. When they saw Leo passing by in their rival's
13 car they had assumed he was in cahoots with their enemy:

14 **Leo:** [Imitating a gruff voice talking to him over the telephone] 'Why you
15 lookin' to kill Chino?'

16 I'm like, 'what you mean?'

17 [Gruff voice again], 'Oh, then, why you runnin' around with a nigga that
18 lookin' for my peoples?'

19 I told him, 'What's up with that nut-ass shit! I didn't know nothin' about
20 Chino! Ya'll don't communicate. I didn't know ya'll niggas was goin' through shit.
21 Next time, let a nigga know somethin' before I get shot for no reason!'

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

25 George and Fernando, who were visiting Leo on this occasion, sat back in the
26 uncomfortable plastic chairs of the jail's visiting room exhausted by the high stakes of trivial
27 intrigue and the swirl of baby boy nicknames. They did not quite know how to respond, but Leo
28 had only just begun. He poured out two more stories of horrific recent internecine shootings
29 among his neighborhood friends. Despite his self-reflexive critique of the senselessness of "bein'
30 kilt over nothin'--nut-ass shit," however, the primary lesson Leo had drawn from the
31 kaleidoscopic of deadly gun violence engulfing everyone around him was logic for greater fire
32 power:

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

35 The week before he shot his own worker for stealing his heroin stash, Leo had been
36 staking out Gordo, "the bol who had put \$50,000 on me."

37 **Leo:** I used to go to his girl's crib every night, strapped-up, ready to kill
38 him. But he never showed up. I kept it on the tip. 'Cause if he know I know, he
39 gonna be more of a fuckin' Jedi about killin' me first.

40 George shifted the conversation by asking Leo where he had obtained this last gun. This question
41 opened the Pandora's box of the gun fetishism that seeps into adolescent masculine subjectivities
42 in neighborhoods flooded with cheap, unlicensed and very powerful and deadly automatic
43 weapons. It is crucial to link this intimate account of what looks like sociopathic levels of deadly
44 violence to political and economic forces: the predatory operations of the global firearms
45 industry and the absence of functional gun control laws in the United States. Illegal firearms
46 trade tends to follow the same paths as illegal drugs. The United States has the highest rate of

1 gun ownership in the world. As we noted earlier, the colony of Puerto Rico is perfectly situated
2 for the free flow of arms traffic, saddling it with the tragic distinction of having the highest
3 proportion of homicides committed by firearms (96% in the 2010s) of any nation in the world.
4 Again, Leo's relationship to this propagation of violence is profoundly embedded in peer group
5 friendships and alliances.

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

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

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

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

14 **Leo:** I don't know. They just come to me. Like, [Imitating a sales pitch]
15 'Yo, I got a shotgun \$100. Real cheap! ...' [Voice filling with energy] 'a nine
16 [9mm]... a forty...'

17 And, I'm like, '[Eyes lighting up] I need that!'

18 **GK:** You like guns too much.

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

22 **Conclusion: the political infrastructure of violence and incarceration**

23 In the United States we often blame violent, addicted, or socially destructive behavior on
24 the individuals who engage in it, framing such behavior as "poor choices." Indeed, young men
25 like Leo and Tito in North Philadelphia often blame themselves in just this way. From an
26 anthropological perspective it is more accurate, and from a practical policy and
27 political/humanitarian perspective, more productive, however, to situate these behaviors in the
28 collective and historically situated context of what constrains the life chances of these
29 individuals and is pushing so many of them into self-harmful and community-destructive dead-
30 ends. Unemployed Puerto Ricans living both on the island of Puerto Rico and in its colonial
31 inner city diaspora are burdened with a politically-imposed, disproportionately high level of
32 suffering.

33 Specific ongoing dysfunctional state policies generate these extraordinary rates of firearm
34 injury, interpersonal violence, addiction, mental and physical health disability and "mass
35 incarceration" (Alexander 2010)--or more precisely "hyperincarceration" (Wacquant 2010)--of
36 poor urban African Americans and Latinos, that turns the United States into the nation with the
37 most prisoners on the planet. Blatantly dysfunctional gun control policies in the US flood
38 plentiful supplies of automatic weapons that sell on inner city streets for well below market rate
39 and often well below their cost of production. The institutionally brutalizing effects of
40 overcrowded carceral facilities turn rageful violence into a necessity for survival and self-
41 respect. More complex, but not much less linear, is the way the war on drugs artificially elevates
42 narcotics profits, raising the stakes of struggles for monopoly control of sales corners that have
43 no legal means of mediation, and exacerbating the logic for expressive performance of violence.

44 The punitive law enforcement response of zero-tolerance-to-drugs and racial profiling
45 alienates residents by targeting addicts and local low level street sellers in arbitrary sweeps that
46 fails to protect the neighborhood's physical security. Ironically, the bichotes who successfully

1 monopolize territory often metamorphose their brute force into what is appears to be a virtuous
2 power that maintains a provisional order. Neighbors seek them out as the only available brokers
3 to control the deadly collateral fallout of the violence that undergirds their narcotics profits. For
4 ambitious young men like Tito and Leo in economically devastated neighborhoods, the classic
5 immigrant's American Dream of upward mobility through intrepid entrepreneurship traps them
6 into destructive cycles of violence that they often insightfully condemn even as they reproduce it.
7 Incarcerated as teenagers, many of them are determined to turn their lives around as twenty-
8 something-year-olds, but they face formidable structural challenges:

9 **Leo:** I just don't want to go back to the same nut shit when I get home.
10 Philly is like the fuckin' devil. I need to figure out a game plan to keep me away
11 from the streets. I need to have a job before I get out of here. And I don't know
12 how that's goin' to work. I ain't never had no job before.
13
14

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