

# Just Another Night in a Shooting Gallery

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WE PASSED THROUGH a gaping hole smashed out of the rear brick wall of the only abandoned tenement still standing in the middle of an East Harlem rubble field. My friend did not even pause to allow his eyes to adjust to the late night darkness, and I had to scramble behind him through the entrails of the burnt building pretending everything was perfectly normal. We paused by a large slab of plywood that blocked yet another fractured brick wall and he knocked: 'It's me, Mikey – white Mikey . . . with a friend. He's white too, but don't worry; he's cool.' Shivering wet from the drizzle of a New York City December night we waited to be invited into the shooting gallery. Fidgeting anxiously, I stepped out of the way of a persistent trail of drops that somehow were making their way through five floors of charred rafters directly onto my baseball cap. I noticed that my mouth tasted of metal and I wondered if perhaps this time I had overstepped my limits as an anthropologist.

## 'Copping'

I had run into Mikey two hours earlier while taking out the garbage on my tenement stoop. I had been living in East Harlem with my family for over three years to conduct participant-observation ethnography on street culture and social marginalization. I jumped at Mikey's offer to accompany him to a nearby shooting gallery because most of my friends were crack dealers who snobbed anyone who used 'dope' [heroin]. Mikey owed me a favor for the \$10 I had loaned him last week; and as I learned later, he had plans for hustling me out of a couple of dollars before the night was over.

Mikey was sick with withdrawal pains. He had not had a 'fix' of heroin since early morning. He had just obtained \$20 cash – no point in asking how

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– and, consequently, was in an eager rush ‘to take care of business’. Our first stop was the playground of the local elementary school in our neighborhood which happens to be one of New York City’s most active heroin copping corners. It is also the district headquarters for East Harlem’s public school system, as well as the site of yet another one of the neighborhood’s many public sector eyesores: the hulking shell of a half-block-long junior high school that was closed down due to budget cuts over 20 years ago. Like so many of these city-owned sites of public sector decay, it swarms at all hours of day and night with emaciated junkies. We were greeted at the corner by an eager, emaciated ‘steerer’ advertising that ‘Knockout’ – a well-established local brand – was ‘open, workin’’, and ‘pumpin’ Man! I’m telling you it’s smokin’’. We hurried our stride toward the three-man Knockout team in the middle of the block, which was composed of a ‘pitcher’ who actually makes the hand-to-hand sale and his two look-outs, who also double as bodyguards and touters.

All of a sudden we were bombarded with piercing whistles. A wave of adrenaline swept through me as I feared the other look-outs posted on the ends of the block had mistaken us for undercover narcotics agents. Only moments later, however, their emergency early warning alarm switched to calm shouts in street code announcing the arrival of a police car. Despite being second-generation, New York-born and raised youths, the look-outs all rolled their ‘r’s’ in the rural Puerto Rican *jibaro* accents of their immigrant parents and grandparents, ‘*Carrho feo* [ugly car], *bajando*, *bajando* [coming down] *carrho feo!*’

Switching now from being afraid that the drug sellers had confused us for ‘narcs’ to fearing that the oncoming police officers were going to arrest us, we began walking as if nothing was amiss. We were squarely in view of the squad car which was now bearing down directly upon us flashing its lights but not its siren. Our pace was perhaps just a little too fast; our heads were bent a bit too low; and our arms were swinging a little too fast and wide; but we tried to act like normal white pedestrians strolling innocently through East Harlem at midnight under a freezing December drizzle. Holding my breath as the *bajando* squad car slowed down to examine us, I was convinced we were going to be thrown against the wall and roughly searched as has happened to me so frequently when I am caught on the street after dark in East Harlem by the police. In response to my hissed question, ‘Are you clean?’, Mikey was cursing the fact that he had his ‘works’ (hypodermic syringe) stuffed in his right sock. We held our breath as the police car passed. Behind us I could hear more whistles and ‘*bajando*’ shouts as customers at the far corner were being turned back before having to make the dangerously conspicuous trek down the block directly in front of the raiding officers.

Ironically, some of my closest calls with violence during the almost four years I lived and worked among drug addicts and dealers in East Harlem have been with the police. From the perspective of the police, I am an obnoxious provocation violating New York City’s unwritten apartheid

laws: the only reason for a ‘white boy’ to be in the inner city – especially after dark – is to buy drugs. As a matter of fact, the first time the police stopped me, back in 1985 when I first moved into El Barrio, I naively tried to explain to them in a polite voice that I was an anthropologist studying social marginalization. Convinced I was making fun of them, they had escorted me to the nearest bus stop amidst a litany of curses and ordered me to leave the neighborhood unless I ‘wanted to be taken in to the precinct’. Over the years since then, I have learned to minimize the risk of inciting the police into violence or verbal abuse when they occasionally throw me spread-eagled against building walls to pat me down for drugs and weapons. I answer their questions with effusive ‘yes sirs’ and attempt to mimic a white working-class New York City accent. I now always carry a ‘picture ID’ showing a local East Harlem address and I make sure never to look at them in the eyes when they finally ask for my identification toward the end of their searching, cursing and berating.

On this particular night, however, the police left us alone; perhaps the freezing cold drizzle dissuaded them from leaving their dry, warm squad car. A new problem, however, immediately erupted. Mikey had managed to precipitate a loud argument with the emaciated steerer who had originally accosted us upon our arrival on the block. The steerer was one of those old-time heroin addicts who have completely fallen apart since cocaine and crack flooded the street scene beginning in the late 1980s. Converted from ‘righteous dope fiend’ to ‘crackhead thirst’, he slouches in the gutters of copping corners as a volunteer look-out/touter hoping to hustle petty cash for his crack craving. Almost running to keep up with our fast pace, the emaciated man was aggressively demanding a dollar in payment for having pointed out to us the team of Knockout sellers prior to the arrival of the police car.

Mikey – who is a little rough around the edges and was probably also frustrated that our white skin provoked even the most broken-down wannabe hustlers to attempt intimidation scams on us – protested vehemently that we had ‘no extra funds’; and already knew our way around: ‘We okay already . . . ya hear!’ His aggressive strategy backfired, however, prompting the ‘thirst’ to engage in a loudly postured tirade of inner-city hurt pride: ‘I hate it when people be thinking garbage about me. Don’t diss [disrespect] me like that! What’s a matter with you anyhow. . .’. I quickly lowered my eyes and walked ahead as fast as I could in order to disassociate myself from Mikey as clearly as possible should the argument escalate into violence.

The tension dissipated as fast as it had arisen, however – as it so often does on the street. The angry crack addict suddenly contradicted the logic for why he was furious at Mikey in the first place, and meekly thrust out his hand, openly begging this time for ‘just a little change’ to ‘make a bag’. Now pretending to be a heroin addict, he claimed that all he needed was another ‘50 cent’ to reach the \$10 that constitutes the minimum cost of a glassine postage-stamp-sized packet of heroin on New York City streets. Mikey reached into his pocket and came up with a nickel. I tried to do the same,

but instead clumsily pulled out a subway token further confirming my wealthy, outsider status.

When Mikey and I had finally passed the police car and rid ourselves of our aggressive beggar we faced the desolate fact that it was now well past midnight; the drizzle was turning into rain; the temperature was dropping even lower; and the best heroin copping spot in the neighborhood was swarming with police. Mikey's coughing redoubled, his body decomposing under an addict's physical craving for heroin – 'dee, diesel, manteca, tecata, hair-ron, hah-Ron, hah-row-in' as it is called on the street. Perhaps there was also pneumonia lurking beneath the aches and pains of his opiate-deprived body tissues. I tried to suggest to him that we call the whole thing off and that instead he check himself into the emergency room at the local municipal hospital. His expression clouded over with so much irritated disgust – bordering on dangerous anger – that I quickly shut up, and focused all my energy instead on finding heroin with him.

Somehow flashes of help and hope always rebound out of the darkest recesses of New York's street corners. It is the magic of inner-city drug scenes – always full of infinite potential even during your moments of worst despair. Sure enough, right then, out of nowhere, a woman's emaciated form called out softly from behind a defaced pillar of the abandoned school building, 'SunShine at 114th in the Park.' We did not dare pause lest this self-appointed steerer also demand payment. In fact, both of us pretended not to hear the gentle voice, or notice the huddled form. She was just one more teenage, sex-for-crack 'toss-up'. These most vulnerable of all street-level prostitutes are probably one of the most despairing sights one can possibly encounter on a New York City midnight street in mid-winter. Indeed, in the early 1990s at the height of the crack epidemic a new generation of female street addicts flooded the inner-city street sex trade. This lowered the price of sexual acts to the cost of a budget vial of crack – oscillating between \$3 and \$5 depending on the vagaries of drug gang competition.

We escaped safely from the addicted teenage girl with no further complications, and hurried toward the new copping site in Jefferson Park that she had mentioned. I practically had to stop myself from skipping in order to keep up with Mikey who was once again walking confidently and with purpose despite his aching bones, fever and racking cough. He had that almost joyous drug-addict-going-to-cop-with-money-in-the-pocket gait that is immediately recognizable to anyone enmeshed in the street drug scene.

Arriving at Jefferson Park's entrance, we were both immediately relieved to see the telltale bustle of dope fiends passing money and drugs back and forth in orderly single-file lines. The police were nowhere in sight, and the dealing crew was maintaining a strict, effective control over the whole scene. There were no emaciated, self-appointed steerer/beggar/sex workers to confuse matters. Instead, we were efficiently greeted by the angry barked orders of a steerer who was obviously officially employed on the local heroin company's payroll. Guiding us to the back of the nearest single-file

line along the chain-link fence at the far end of the playground, he warned us that this was strictly ‘a place of business’, and that since we were together, only one of us needed to wait on line. I was eager to document the entire drug copping experience from beginning to end and, to my surprise, Mikey agreed to entrust me with his two precious \$10 bills. He then walked a safe distance away into the shadows of some nearby trees.

I found myself sandwiched between a line of a dozen impatient dope fiends most of whom were sniffing and coughing in the early stages of heroin withdrawal. Once again, I was the only white face, but this time nobody seemed to notice. Perhaps it was obvious to everyone that only a full blown dope fiend could possibly tolerate being so cold and so wet on such a miserable late night. To my delight, I was immediately included in the line’s anxious discussion of the quality of the heroin being sold during that particular shift, ‘Have you tried it?’, ‘Is it good? Does it work?’ Everyone relaxed visibly when an elderly Puerto Rican man with the distinct hoarse rasp of a well-intoxicated junkie assured us in Spanish from the middle of the line, ‘*Eso te arregla*’ (This will set you straight). One persistently anxious voice from the back, however, insisted on verifying, ‘How long ago did you do it?’

With concerns over product quality temporarily abated, we soon found other things to worry and complain about. A young customer being ‘served’ at the front of the line was buying two ‘bundles’, and was taking too long to count his packets and money. A bundle consists of ten individually wrapped packets filled with a \$10 pinch of what looks like white confectionery sugar or talcum powder. The addict ahead of me cursed the manager of the operation for having just closed down the separate ‘bundle’ line for wholesale customers that had been operating all evening long. We all began to suspect that the pitcher might be on the verge of running out of what was evidently a good quality product.

It is always a reassuring sign to suspicious addicts when a copping spot is well-organized and busy enough to separate retail purchasers from wholesale customers. Active bundle lines indicate that the quality and/or the ‘count’ (quantity) of the heroin being sold during a particular shift has been good enough to attract a serious out-of-the-neighborhood clientele engaged in reselling the product at inflated prices in the suburban communities surrounding New York. Electricity practically shoots through the air at busy copping corners when a steerer all of a sudden calls out, ‘Who’s here for bundles? . . . Bundles! Bundles only, ovah heah!’ On several occasions when business has been especially heavy, I have seen the manager of a site close down the single-bag retail lines, shouting to the dismay of the low-budget junkie crowd, ‘Bundles only! Bundles only!’ This forces the distrustful addicts to rush around seeking out vaguely trustworthy acquaintances with whom to pool their precious cash until they reach the \$100 minimum needed to purchase a full bundle.

The most dramatic moment at which to arrive at a busy copping corner is precisely when a new shift of sellers is opening a fresh product line. The

crowd of addicts is milling about, with both strangers and acquaintances eagerly asking one another, 'Who's working? Who's holding? Is it good? Anyone done it?' A lone steerer rushes onto the scene shouting grouchy, 'Single file! Single file! Come on! Come on!' The crowd springs to attention, jostling one another for a front-line position. This invariably prompts the steerer to threaten angrily not to sell anything to anyone until the line becomes orderly. On one occasion I actually saw an eager crowd knock a steerer over in the generalized struggle for front-line positioning. The steerer's scolding, however, usually motivates the expectant addicts to quiet down and many will actually echo the call to order, 'Come on! Line up! Chill out! Hold steady!' One sunny Sunday afternoon, I watched a steerer in a playground in the South Bronx jump on top of a picnic table to harangue a crowd of about 25 eager heroin addicts, 'Get orderly! Or nobody's gettin' nothin'! What's 'a matter wic'h'u? Orda'!' Behind me a wide-eyed teenager was eagerly calling out to a friend across the street, 'Yo! Yo! Come ovah heah. Quick! This dope be pumpin'!'

Once a modicum of order has been established, the site manager discretely signals for the 'pitcher' to emerge out of the crowd. He – only rarely are women ever members of these sales crews – stands at the side of the steerer who has been yelling for order. Invariably hunched over due to their intensely focused concentration, pitchers are exclusively responsible for collecting all the cash and dispensing all the drugs that change hands at the site. Most pitchers will not accept single dollar bills, and demand that their customers arrive with their fistful of bills neatly ordered and openly displayed, 'How many? How many? How many? Have your money ready!' If a crowd's unruliness persists, a manager may motion the pitcher to begin selling to the back of the line in order to punish the greedier customers who pushed their way up to the front of the line. Another alternative is for a second, reserve pitcher to be called onto the scene to 'serve' the back of the line. This efficiently splits the over-eager crowd in half and diminishes the amount of vulnerable time everyone has to spend exposing themselves to arrest at the open-air copping site.

One of the recurring nightmares of all addicts at these kinds of reputable and highly organized copping corners is for the pitcher to run out of product; and that is precisely what happened to me on the SunShine line in Jefferson Park. The pitcher ran out with only three more customers ahead of me, prompting me to join the crowd's chorus of groans and curses. I even caught myself imitating the cranky, outraged tone peculiar to street junkies on the verge of withdrawal pains. To our relief, however, the pitcher did not order us to leave; he merely trotted 50 yards back into the darkness of the playground and huddled with a newly arrived 'runner' and two additional look-out/bodyguards who had somehow appeared out of the night with a fresh supply of product. Careful to maintain the order of our single-file line along the chain link fence, we waited impatiently for them to count receipts and inventory. These drop-off and pick-up logistics constitute the riskiest moment in a street sales operation. It is the ideal time for the police to stage

a raid or for clients and rivals to engineer a hold-up. Perhaps this is why yet another look-out emerged from the shadows, barking ever louder orders and carefully monitoring all of our movements. The selling operation was obviously more concerned about a hold-up than a police bust, and the look-out snarled at Mikey who was hurrying over anxiously to see what was the matter, 'If you ain't buyin' get goin'. This is a place of business. Come on! Come on! Move out! Buy and fly! Buy and fly!'

Coincidentally, at this very moment, a legal street hawker walked up to us displaying half a dozen bright blue foldable umbrellas: 'Only two dollahs; two dollahs. For the little lady at home. Take a look. These is 17 dollahs in the store.' Even though he was merely taking advantage of our huddle of exceptional buying power in the middle of a late night downpour, the look-outs and steerers converged on him in a rage, suspecting the camouflaged activities of a well-organized stick-up crew. Worse yet, someone on the line actually tried to buy one of the umbrellas. The hawker was unable to complete the sale, however. He was forced to run away cursing when he saw one of the look-outs reach conspicuously into the groin area of his baggy jeans as if he were drawing a firearm. I chuckled at this all-American manifestation of determined, high-risk entrepreneurship in the inner city. Despite what politicians, social workers or social scientists might claim, America's inner cities have emerged as the latest frontier for the descendants of immigrants and other citizens of color to scramble violently for a proverbial piece of the American pie. The multi-billion-dollar drug economy is an irrefutable testament to how alive and vital capitalism remains among the thousands of people who are dismissed by policy makers as the passive, demoralized 'underclass'. Rain, snow or shine, fistfuls of money and drugs flow among tens of thousands of skinny sick men and women in scuffed sneakers desperately seeking material sustenance and emotional meaning on inner-city streets throughout the United States.

When the pitcher finally returned to the front of the line he warned us, 'This is it! This is the last bundle. After this there's no more. Get what you need now!' We groaned anxiously yet again; and, once more, through the powerless pitch of our voices there crept the almost reflexively threatening tone that punctuates most business transactions in the street economy. Only moments later, my voice had joined the chorus of aggressive heckling that was being directed against yet another ragged customer at the front of the line who was slowly counting out his money from a large wad of \$10 bills. A tall, elderly African-American customer toward the rear of the line complained most loudly, 'What's the matter with this nigga'? Save some for me. Don't buy 'em all. All's I need is two! Come on man hurry up.' I felt momentarily comfortable and safe as I shared in the group solidarity that had emerged out of a commonly focused hostility and anxiety over being left sick without 'product'. Moments later, the pitcher was finally asking me 'How many?'; I was curtly answering 'two' as I thrust Mikey's two \$10 bills through the chain link fence. Without even looking up from his fistful of tiny rectangular glassine packets all carefully stamped in pink with the logo

'SunShine' covered by a strip of scotch tape to prevent unauthorized opening by addicted employees, the pitcher handed me two crisp packets of heroin.

I quickly spun around out of the way while discreetly tucking the packets under my belt in a doubled over fold of my shirt. Still worried about the possibility of a sudden police raid, I scanned the dark row of crumbling tenements surrounding the playground in differential stages of decay and arson. Pretending to be fumbling with my fly rather than hiding narcotics, I swung into a rapid stride to catch up with Mikey, who had already begun to walk fast down the block away from the scene. My fears now shifted to surveying the pavement ahead and behind me for any signs that one of the hawk-eyed addicts lurking in the shadows might decide to 'take-off' this skinny white boy [me] aflush from copping 'fresh product'. Ironically, my best protection is the omnipresent suspicion on the street that anyone with white skin is probably a 'Dee Tee' (undercover detective). Mikey, in contrast to my wariness, had become a new man, full of confidence and energy: dope was clearly visible at the end of his tunnel. He instantly demanded I give him his two packets of heroin and then, once again, shoulders rolling with the speed and purpose of junkies 'taking care of business', we hurried uptown towards his favorite shooting gallery 10 blocks away.

Halfway there, Mikey swung into an all-night, corner grocery store that was hermetically sealed from any customer contact by bullet-proof plastic partitions. He suggested I 'buy a beer or something' to make sure I had exact change to cover my share of the \$2 'house fee' at the shooting gallery which he assured me I had to pay even if I was not going to be 'doin' no drugs'. I was a little concerned by how carefully Mikey watched the cashier count out my \$8 change from the \$10 bill that I used to pay for a quart of malt liquor. I then became downright embarrassed when he insisted that I return the \$5 bill that I had received as change and demand that the irritated Yemeni cashier give us single bills instead. Each exchange with the cashier had to be spun awkwardly through a homemade gun-and-knife-proof revolving plastic security door, and on the last go-around I pinched my pinkie under the hinge of the metal swivel. Cursing angrily to cover my giggles, I wondered curiously what petty hustle Mikey was trying to engineer that could possibly explain his fixation that I obtain eight single dollar bills.

As we were finally cutting through the vacant lot leading to the shooting gallery, Mikey warned me one last time: 'Your Spanish won't help you here, Phil; this is a black scene. So remember, you're my brother.' I attempted lamely to parry with a street-style joke about how much uglier he was than I, and how 'all whites don't look that much alike'. I insisted we accept our exotic skin color and just be who we were: friendly acquaintances.

Barely muttering 'awright, awright' and adding bossily something to the effect of 'just follow me close, and watch where you put your feet', Mikey hopped eagerly across the final stretch of wreckage and in through the abandoned tenement's back brick wall. Staying as close to Mikey as possible, I straightened myself up in the dark of what was probably once



the corner of the abandoned building's lobby. The charred remains of a central staircase were barely visible above me, but I took Mikey's admonishment to heart and immediately focused all my attention on the ground immediately in front of me in order to avoid – none too soon – a gaping hole where a marble slab had fallen through the floor into the basement below.

If Mikey's adrenaline was pumping as hard as mine at violating inner-city apartheid in this most taboo of all American crannies, it was strictly in a lumpen anticipation of upcoming ecstasy. He was not suffering from the middle-class outsider's terror that was now engulfing me. Convinced that I was about to fall through the precarious floor and break all my limbs on the basement floor below; expecting at any moment to be ripped limb from limb by thirsty addicts seeking the loose dollar bills I had strategically distributed through my coat and pants pockets; and suddenly envisioning an imminent attack by a pack of oversized New York City rats, I cursed myself for having no common sense. I had to trust Mikey who was eagerly – and blindly as far as I could tell – plunging through some shadows to our left.

### **Shooting Dope**

Before I knew it, I was ducking sideways through yet another overhanging slab of broken bricks into what had apparently once been a ground floor apartment. Blinking in what seemed like bright candlelight, I felt a vague warmth emanating from a sputtering fire to my right. Striving to compose myself I smiled eagerly, at Doc, the manager of the shooting gallery who was introducing himself with a loud, 'Welcome to my place'. To my surprise he graciously shooed me into one of the four dilapidated chairs ringing a grimy table cluttered with drug debris in the center of the room.

Mikey was not needing or paying attention, to any awkward introductions. He no longer needed to prove or justify his identity to anyone as he was instantly recognizable to everyone beyond any shade of doubt, to be what is proudly referred to as 'a dope fiend' among heroin addicts on the street. Intent on his upcoming shot of relief – and possibly of ecstasy if the quality was good – Mikey hardly nodded hello before eagerly dumping the entire contents of both his packets of heroin into a charred spoon that he had picked up off the detritus in the middle of the table. He did, however, clearly turn down Doc's offer to 'rent' him the 'house needle' as that would have cost him extra. I imagine he was salivating by now, his body sweating and passing gas in anticipatory excitement. I vaguely heard him mumble something to Doc about his 'buddy' having 'change' for the 'house fee'.

Not yet fully aware that he was hustling me for his share of the \$2 admission fee, I somewhat over-eagerly pulled out two crumpled single dollar bills that I had purposefully left easily accessible in my outside coat pocket. To my consternation, Doc suddenly tensed up. Mikey, meanwhile, skidded his chair to the far end of the table and ducked his head even closer

to his spoon of heroin. My primary concern was to prevent any ambiguity from arising over my not being a drug injector – or even a drug user – and quickly I began explaining in what I feared was a hopelessly lame tone of voice that I would not be shooting up ... as I was just drinking tonight ... and simply wanted to ‘hang with my buddy Mikey’ ... in order to ‘learn about the street’. In my bubbling confusion, I even heard myself stammering something to the effect of my being ‘cultural anthropologist’ and a ‘college professor’ who was ‘thinking of writing a book’ about ‘life on the street’. Persuaded that Doc was now going to be completely convinced that I was nothing but an undercover police officer, I struggled to understand why he was ignoring my semi-coherent and highly dubious – even though perfectly true – explanation of self, and was instead tapping his finger with irritation on top of the two dollar bills I had placed on the table. I stared at him blankly, prolonging the silence until he finally snarled, ‘Someone owes me two dollars more, whether you be shooting or not’. Mikey was now hissing directly in my ear, ‘Come on Phil, can’t you cover for me? Just this one time? I don’t got no change handy.’

With a flood of relief, I finally realized that all the tension in the room was being caused by Mikey’s attempt to make me pay his \$2 house fee. Assailing Mikey with what I considered to be an appropriately aggressive flood of curses and personally demeaning insults over his stinginess, I quickly handed over his share of the house fee to Doc. I now finally understood what Mikey’s shenanigans had been about at the Yemeni grocery store when he had insisted on obtaining so many single dollar bills in the change for my beer.

As soon as the extra money was on the table, Doc began treating me as a completely normal shooting gallery patron. Dripping wet, flushed with fear, excited despite myself at my arrival at this new setting, I realize in retrospect that probably one of the single best possible proofs that I was not an undercover policeman was precisely this kind of public penny-pinching hassle between me and my alleged ‘running partner’ over a measly \$2. Ironically, from this point on, I probably could not have pretended I was a narcotics officer even if I had wanted to.

In any case, Doc once again became all smiles. He quickly pocketed the rest of my money and concentrated on making me feel comfortable. Relieved, I took a big gulp from my quart of beer and offered him some. In retrospect, I realize that Doc’s decision to befriend me followed the straightforward lumpen logic of the street economy. Having publicly proved myself to be ineffective at guarding my money, and a little too friendly, gentle and full of smiles, I represented an ideal victim. It was well worth investing the time and energy of building a long-term street hustle relationship with me. Furthermore, Doc was probably a bit bored and looked forward to the curiosity of ‘conversating’ with a white boy who claimed – of all outlandish things – to be a college professor.

The table was littered with a tangled mess of discarded glassine heroin envelopes and miniature ziplock coke packets and crack vials. Doc was

asking what we had purchased, telling us (without even waiting for an answer) the brand names of what was good that night – Rambo, 007, SunShine, Latin Power, OJ, Mandela – what was ‘open’; and where the cops were patrolling. We added our bit of information to the street-savvy pool of knowledge to be imparted to the next customer: ‘Knockout’s open on 117th but is crazy hot, and SunShine in Jefferson Park just closed.’ Mikey was thrilled to hear SunShine’s reputation confirmed yet again, but I was sort of disappointed that everything of significance from our last two rain-drenched hours running after ecstasy could be summed up in such a laconic sentence.

As my eyes continued to adjust to the flickering candle light I tried politely to discern what – or who – the two bundled shapes might be on the far side of the room. My reconnoitering was interrupted by a loud knock on the plywood plank door. Two new clients, Slim and his friend Flex, walked through the hole in the wall, stamping their feet and shaking off melting snowflakes with the satisfied expressions of eager customers entering a welcoming place of business. Apparently, the rain outside had turned into snow flurries. Slim sat down next to me and to my surprise immediately engaged me in a relaxed, familiar conversation about how lucky I had been to ‘get served by the pitcher’ on the SunShine line.

It took me a few seconds to realize that I had earned Slim’s friendly familiarity by waiting at his side along the chain link fence in the Jefferson Park playground. I was almost embarrassed not to have recognized him right away. He had been one of the more aggressive rasping voices that had complained threateningly each time someone at the front of the line had purchased more than a couple of packets, and/or took too long to count their money. Slim had been left stranded without his ‘cure’, and had been forced to go three blocks further downtown to purchase DOA, a less reputable brand. On the DOA line, he had met another ‘running buddy’, Flex, who was now sitting next to him, his brow knit in earnest concentration while he dumped his precious powder into the same kitchen spoon that Mikey had just replaced on the tabletop.

Meanwhile, Doc was asking Mikey if he needed a tie. I had not even seen Mikey fill his syringe with water from out of the topless plastic jug that lay under the table; or watched him re-empty this same water into the little pile of white powder at the bottom of his spoon which was hanging over the edge of the table balanced under the weight of a wooden candle holder; or admired the steadiness of his hands as he lifted the spoon to heat it over the candle to make sure every last bit of precious heroin had fully dissolved; or noticed him drop a tiny ball of cigarette filter into the dissolved heroin to trap particles as he drew the cloudy liquefied narcotic back into his syringe. I kicked myself for my lapse in concentration. I had been warned by an AIDS-outreach worker from Denver, Colorado to observe carefully the micro-shooting practices of New York City junkies. Although most AIDS prevention messages emphasize the danger of sharing needles, a big problem faced by addicts is the dirty water that they inject. Lacking running water and convenient receptacles, addicts frequently

clean out their bloodied syringes in the same containers from out of which they draw their water. They often share their 'cookers' (spoons or bottle caps for dissolving the heroin) and their 'cottons' (cigarette filters or pinches of real cotton swabs to trap undissolved particles). At busy galleries, clients inject water pink from the blood residues of the previous half dozen injectors.

I barely noticed Mikey's impatient refusal of Doc's offer to hold his 'tie' while he unrolled his shirt sleeve to expose a chunky white forearm with a long line of red prick marks. It took Mikey less than 20 seconds to shoot up: he flexed his fist a few times to get his forearm veins to pop out and then hit a vein pretty far up towards his wrist artery, just beyond where the last red pock mark had been left from his early morning injection. Once the needle was a few millimeters below the skin he pulled back the stopper with his thumb to make sure blood flooded the syringe's chamber. This is called 'registering', and indicates that the needle tip is squarely inside the vein and has not pierced right through, or rolled off the vein casing into surrounding tissue. Registering is a crucial part of 'shooting up' because if an injector carelessly injects the heroin into the muscle or fatty tissue surrounding the vein, it balloons up into a painful bruise. Most importantly, the expectant addict will miss the initial euphoric rush when a successful hit of heroin is released directly inside a racing blood vessel and pulses within seconds up the arm, through the heart and into the brain for a bull's eye of sedated warmth and relaxation.

Once again, without hardly even pausing to sit back and appreciate the fruits of his past few hours of running around with me in the rain playing cat and mouse with police officers and street hustlers, Mikey was rolling his shirt sleeve back down, packing his 'works', and getting ready to leave. Nevertheless, I could detect that Mikey was relieved. He had not been 'beat'; the product was not 'wack'. For once he had done something that did not need to be qualified with a complaint. He looked almost surprised to be happy and relaxed. When I asked him if it was good, he humbly murmured in the raspy voiced slur of an intoxicated junkie, 'T's' all right. Yeah, t's' decent.'

As Slim and Flex heated their heroin and loaded the house needle with the same swift, efficient hand motions that Mikey had used – as well as the same dirty water and the same dirty cooker spoon, and the same crumpled cigarette filter cotton – Mikey was heading out the door with a barely audible 'I'll-see-you-later', followed by further spasms from his hollow, racking cough. Perhaps, he was concerned that Doc might demand another \$2 from him should he overstay his welcome; maybe he was irritated by my repeated injunctions to have his lungs checked out at the local hospital for pneumonia; or perhaps, he was just being commonsensical about the real dangers of hanging out for longer than strictly necessary in an East Harlem shooting gallery well past midnight on a stormy winter night – especially when you are white. More to the point, he had already hustled the only easy victim in this space; it was time to move on and scrounge up enough money

for his next fix before his body once again started aching for heroin sometime around sunrise.

Maybe I was supposed to be nervous at all of a sudden becoming an unaccompanied, lone ‘white boy’, because everyone around the table noticed with surprise Mikey’s ‘abandoning’ of me. Perhaps to express companionship and solidarity with me, they converted my concern over Mikey’s pneumonia-like cough into a forum for berating Mikey for not taking care of himself. For a moment they sounded like wise, elderly matrons eager to impart their common sense on an errant child for wearing inadequate clothing on a cold day. Slim clucked something about how important it is to wear a warm hat and he actually pulled a large red, yellow and green wool Rastafarian hat out of his pocket and covered his overgrown afro. We were all clearly happy with ourselves to be able to share our righteous concern over the behavior of our wayward dope fiend friend. As if following the cue of our common respectability, Doc stood up – somewhat precipitously – to clean off the table. Even if he might not have really believed my claim that I was ‘writing a book about street life’, he wanted, nevertheless, to impress me with his cleanliness. With deft housekeeping hand motions he busily scraped up the wax spilled by the candles, swept off the half-dozen match tips, miniature ziplock baggies, cocaine foil wrappers, crack vials and tops of crack vials, and he even cupped his hand under the edge of the table to catch the trash, throwing it all out in the fire rather than carelessly dumping it onto the floor. In the process, however, he carefully selected out from the mess all the empty heroin envelopes that had been scattered throughout the mess. He stacked them almost gingerly in a neat pile in front of his seat. Before sitting down, however, he managed to fumble a foul looking damp rag from out of the darkness and began to wipe, one more time, the residual dust, blood drops, and other dubious wettish waste from off of the tabletop.

Throughout the tidying process, in an effective attempt to welcome, reassure and further evaluate me, Doc had kept up a steady, happy chatter about ‘the decent place’ that he ‘tried to run’; he was not ‘gonna let things get dirty’; he ‘ran a classy joint’; etc. Indeed, within minutes, most traces of the past several hours of injecting had been wiped up. The table looked spotlessly clean and orderly. Pushing his offended housekeeper scenario to the limit, Doc reproached Flex – who was nodding heavily from the effects of his injection – for having carelessly left a fresh pack of litter scattered about him. In the same breath of righteousness, he picked up the open house hypodermic needle that Flex had also dropped on the table in front of him, and carefully capped it, and laid it strategically in the center of the table, ready for the next customer. Doc did not bother rinsing the syringe out with bleach – or even with water – to kill any trapped HIV virus. I asked if he had any bleach to clean the needle and he simply shrugged, adding politely, ‘Bring some, next time you come by’.

Slim had not hit yet, he was carefully adding some powder cocaine into his spoon of already heated and dissolved heroin solution. He was preparing

a 'speedball' – the contradictory combination of stimulant-cum-depressant that has always been highly appreciated by street addict connoisseurs, and has now become the rage among even the most down and out 'dope fiends', ever since the Colombian cartels began flooding the US market with inexpensive cocaine in the 1980s. Flex sat up from his nodding to pursue the same speedball high, except that he 'chased it' by 'stemming', i.e. by smoking crack in a 'stem', a 4-inch-long cylindrical glass pipe with crumpled wire mesh stuffed down one end where the crack is loaded. Crack is merely an alloy of cocaine and baking soda. Unlike powder cocaine, however, it burns smoothly, allowing it to be smoked efficiently. Crack's psychoactive ingredient is the same as cocaine's, but it provides a more dramatically euphoric rush than powder cocaine which can only be sniffed or injected. This is because of the rapidity with which the capillaries in the lungs absorb substances and channel them almost instantaneously to the brain's pleasure receptors.

Doc, meanwhile, was hunching over his pile of empty heroin packets gently scraping them with a flat-edge razor to remove the tiny flecks of heroin – and whatever kind of plastic coats glassine envelopes – stuck to their insides. After several minutes of intense concentration – his tongue practically hanging out the side of his mouth – he had collected a shootable-sized pile of what looked like clean, white heroin. The care he took in scraping the packets made him look refreshingly nerdy and almost vulnerably earnest – like a school child touching up the glue marks on a plastic model airplane. Throughout this process, he maintained a steady stream of relaxed small talk, reconstructing himself into a most cheerful image of recycling energy efficiency. I had not yet heard of the suffocating chronic medical condition among elderly junkies that the doctors at East Harlem's municipal hospital have dubbed 'talc lung'. Apparently, the additives that are typically used to cut New York City's 'China White' heroin, such as talcum powder, powdered milk and Mannitol baby laxative, cling disproportionately to the sides of glassine envelopes. They eventually become trapped in the tiny capillaries in the lungs which sieve impurities out of the bloodstream. Being an inert substance which does not dissolve, talcum powder is especially dangerous. It sits indefinitely in the body's deepest recesses until it eventually clogs them, causing a progressive emphysema-like suffocation in the lung tissue.

At the far end of the table, Slim was just finishing the preparation of his heroin-cum-coke speedball concoction. Like Doc he was happily chatting, confident of a good, upcoming high since he was holding the same product as Flex, and Flex was already nodding deeply. Once Slim had finally loaded his works, I expected him to take off his jacket and roll up his sleeve, or at worst take off his shoes, or roll up his jeans and search for a clean vein below the knees. Instead Slim arched back his neck and called over to one of the forms huddled on the old mattress against the far wall under a mound of covers beyond the flickering shadows of the candle light.

It turned out to be Pops, a true veteran dope fiend, considerably older

and even frailer than Doc. Pops had barely moved since I entered the gallery, but at Slim's beck he jumped to his feet over eagerly. I guess he was expecting a 'taste', i.e. a drug tip for the service he was about to render; or maybe he was just trying to be helpful. Nobody likes to be taken for granted; worse yet, perhaps Pops was scared of being thrown out of the gallery if he did not prove himself to be useful. Pops started massaging Slim's jugular, carefully holding Slim's loaded syringe high above his head well out of harm's way. In the flickering candlelight he rendered the flickering silhouette of a Statue of Liberty. His hypodermic needle – full of heroin, coke and perhaps HIV from the traces of a previous customer's blood – was substituting for the torch of freedom.

I tried – and almost succeeded – calmly to ignore this spectacle, acting as if it were totally normal for a shriveled old man to jab a syringe into another middle-aged man's neck. I was unable, however, to prevent myself from noticing how carefully Pops pulled back the hypodermic's plunger to make sure blood from the neck's vein spurt into the syringe before injecting its contents. His head cocked tensely to the side, Slim let out a steady stream of directions and feedback. Somehow he remained frozen motionless throughout the operation: 'That's right; keep steady; you're in. Steady now; that's right' slowly; that's right. Go ahead! Come on!'

When Slim was finally able to lean back in his chair and allow his competing waves of cocaine and heroin to flush through his synapses, he grumbled something about Pops needing to learn to hit someone in the neck without making it burn so much. Nevertheless, the old man was proud of what he had just accomplished, and Slim quickly burst into urgent conversation as an initial coke rush from out of his coke/heroin mixture overwhelmed his speedball narcotized balance. I forgot to notice if, and what, Slim paid Pops. He was busy recounting yet again to anyone who cared to listen which street corners had the best heroin; where he had last seen police patrols; who had been arrested lately; and why so many people on the street lacked so much common sense, and did such stupid things. Almost in a reverse conjugation of the coke-induced crest of Slim's injection, Flex was nodding deeply on a prolonged heroin ebb from out of his own heroin-cum-crack mélange. Flex's relaxed heroin bonhomie soaked up Slim's hyped-up coke intensity. Like polar valences attracting one another, the complementing tides of their respectively out-of-synch speedball highs welded the two men into animated conversation. They were unabashedly expressing mutual fraternal bliss. Oblivious to their surroundings, skidding in and out of contradictory tides of chemical exaltation, they were happy to be alive; proud of themselves; and invigorated by the sudden friendship that narcotics are capable of constructing and destructing in the wink of an eye.

Doc suddenly moved his chair away from the table and motioned me to come sit by him. Perhaps embarrassed by the almost child-like appreciation that Flex and Slim were expressing for one another, he somewhat threateningly patted the space by his side urging me 'to conversate' with

him, and 'to pay no mind' to our speedballing companions. He complained about the loudness of their chatter and the fact that Slim had failed to clean up the droplets of still warm blood that had spurting from his neck onto the table. The house needle had yet again been carelessly discarded unsheathed on the table. For some reason, Doc still wanted to insist that he 'kept a good place'; and that his guests (me) should not get the 'wrong impression'; and that 'just because there ain't no electricity here' it 'don't mean folks shouldn't clean up after themselves' (staring hard at Slim); and finally that he was especially appreciative of patrons (smiling at me again) who were tidy. I was always welcome back, Doc assured me. With a smug smile to punctuate the exclusion of Slim and Flex, he slid his chair even closer to mine.

As if to fill a sudden lull in our conversation and wrench my wavering attention away from our speedballing, babbling companions, Doc moved his chair back against the tabletop, motioned me to follow suit, and then tossed onto the table right in front of me, an open gum wrapper full of cocaine, 'Go ahead take it; it's for you. You like cocaine don't ya?' I thanked him, touched by the fact that he had so trustingly thrust the foil out of his own reach and completely within my direct control. Had I been a 'thirst', I could have consumed the entire contents without even negotiating a price. Once again, a little concerned that I might arouse suspicion for not being a drug user, I took a big gulp of beer and politely – but lamely – turned down his offer, 'I'm not really into coke'. Just to be safe I also noted that I had already spent 'just about all my money tonight' anyhow.

Contradicting my cautious claims of pennilessness, Doc insisted that money was not the issue. He assured me that I could just give him 'any amount of change' that I might have left in my pocket for a portion of what was in the gum wrapper foil. In fact, however, I suspect that if I had sniffed or shot the cocaine greedily without first specifying a price, Doc might have taken advantage of its ambiguous value and grossly overcharged me. I would certainly not have been in a position to resist any threats of violence for so carelessly incurring a debt. It would have been my estimate against his, and he was in a much better position than I to mobilize violence and prevail. As I pushed the coke back toward him, I quickly threw another crumpled dollar bill onto the tabletop just to ease any economic tensions that might have been building due to my monopoly of a prime seat at the gallery's shooting table without renting any paraphernalia or buying any drugs. Our somewhat awkward but still friendly negotiation was interrupted by a loud knock on the plywood slab followed by the familiar rasp of a junkie's voice, 'It's me, Shorty'. A wretched gust of freezing wind entered with Shorty, foreboding an end to the vague cocoon of vulnerable warmth we had been able to maintain in the room thus far.

Shorty sat by my side and hastily began preparing a shot of heroin with the same steady, efficient hand movements as the previous patrons. Like the others before him, he took absolutely no notice of me. He did, however, stare concertedly at the open foil of coke lying invitingly by the side of Doc's pile



of heroin shavings. Doc finally offered him some, but even before Shorty had had a chance to complain or haggle over the price, Doc was already defensively snarling an inflated value for the contents. I was almost embarrassed by the blatant dissonance between how generously Doc had offered the same supply to me only a minute earlier. In another setting, Doc would have been accused of racist discrimination.

Their negotiations escalated tensely: Shorty claimed he had almost no money left, and Doc riposted angrily with a demand for immediate payment of the \$2 house fee before he would even consider an offer for a share of the coke. Slim and Flex stopped their bubbling dialogue and stared at the ground. Slim actually put his hand over the top of his eyes and lowered his head, flashing me a subtle, worried grin that I interpreted as a helpful warning to be careful. Playing peek-a-boo with the fingers of his upheld hand to monitor the demeanor of what had now escalated into an open argument, Slim pulled his Rastafarian wool cap lower over his ears, scraped his chair even closer to Flex's and resumed his conversation, but in a whisper. Not unlike my attempt to disassociate myself from Mikey when he began arguing with the steerer/beggar on Knockout's copping corner in front of the abandoned school building a few hours earlier, Slim was distancing himself as explicitly as possible from whatever confrontation might be brewing in his immediate vicinity. He wanted to ensure that no one could possibly interpret that he was taking sides, or even cared about the outcome. Nevertheless, his mouth collapsed tensely as his cocaine high metamorphosed – as it so often does – into a flood of anxious paranoia. At least I hoped Slim was suffering from a coke-induced overreaction because I was sitting right in the middle between the two arguing parties. Among inherently nervous or hyperactive users, cocaine causes unpredictable highs that sometimes degenerate into violent psychosis. Indeed, with so much inexpensive, highly pure cocaine coursing through so many different people's veins, in so many unpredictable speedball combinations on the streets of most major cities, the stakes around street violence escalated throughout the USA in the 1980s and early 1990s. It is impossible to know when someone on a serious cocaine binge might suddenly feel irreparably 'dissed' – disrespected – and decide they need to resort to violence to restore their injured dignity.

When Shorty finally pushed three crumpled bills across the table at Doc, grumbling angrily about Doc making such a big scene over 'nothin' but chump change', I thought all the tension in the room would immediately subside. Doc, however, decided to savor his triumph and prolong the confrontation. He deftly knocked out half of the foil's contents into his pile of heroin shavings before handing what was left over to Shorty. This caused poor Slim to dive even lower and closer to Flex, snapping his fingers shut over his eyes. Shorty sucked air noisily through his teeth; we held our breath, electric flashes cutting through the air around us. But false alarm, nothing happened. Doc's 'overreaction' to Shorty's attempt to forfeit his \$2 house fee via purchasing the foil of coke had, in fact, been carefully

calculated. If Doc is to maintain his credibility as an effective shooting gallery manager, he needs to set confrontational precedents in full view of his paying customers and make public spectacles out of any would-be hustlers. Exactly what I had failed to do when Mikey took me for \$2 earlier that night. Doc's assertion of his authority over Shorty was all that much more important symbolically because Shorty was young, healthy and strong. He had recently been released from prison where he had been 'driving iron' (lifting weights) and eating 'three squares a day' for the past two years. Despite Doc's gloating victory in this particular case, it struck me that his days are numbered: He looked awfully thin, aged and vulnerable in the freezing cold, flickering candle light.

### **More Speedballing**

The calm after Doc and Shorty's storm allowed me, once again, to scan the entire room. I forced myself to look directly into everyone's eyes. Pops, the oldest man in the room, and the 'house doctor' for injecting clients whose veins had collapsed from years of addiction as in Slim's case, had crumpled onto a filthy mattress in the self-effacing manner of hired help. Shivering, he had dragged himself well out of range of the candle and fire light. Desperate to trap as much of his body heat as possible and to deflect most of the occasional rain drops that fell from the charred rafters high above us, Pops had swathed himself in an amorphous pile of ragged blankets that he had then enveloped in ripped sheets of plastic. When Pop all of a sudden realized that I was looking directly at him, he shyly nodded his head, and propped himself up on his elbows with a faint smile. Thinking I was listening to Doc, Pops echoed his approval to the aggressive self-congratulatory soliloquy that Doc had yet again embarked upon, repeating another version of how concerned he was over 'attracting good people', how important it was to 'keep the table tidy', and how hard he tried to 'keep a clean joint'. It was not long before Pops broke his eye contact with me and collapsed back down, exhausted under his ragged patchwork of blankets and plastic.

By now I had long since finished my quart of malt liquor. I stood up and stretched so as to obtain a clearer look into the back recesses of the room where a second bundled shape had begun emitting, at unpredictable intervals, deep guttural moans of delight. This explicitly happy, relaxed form turned out to be an elderly woman. Her eyes lidded three-quarters shut as if to appreciate more fully the internal peace of her heroin nod, she also had a glass crack stem balanced delicately between her fingers as if it were an imported cigarette. With the phlegmy rasp that is the trademark of superannuated dope fiends, her almost obscene groans of pleasure seemed to burst forth involuntarily, from deep inside her blankets. Everyone seemed to think her choruses of bizarrely proto-erotic bliss were completely normal. It was as if she was the shooting gallery's speedball conductor: she effectively paced and punctuated the rise and fall of the various

combinations of coke, crack and heroin tides that were washing through the synapses of the patrons.

Every now and then she would fumble with her crack pipe, light it up, and temporarily snap to a wider awakened consciousness. On those occasions, she proved to be following the details of our conversations, because the few comments that she contributed were always enthusiastic affirmations of whatever was being said. For example, she interrupted one of Doc's redundant tirades over 'what a good place I run', with:

Yes that's a fact. And ain't it something! We been gettin' straight every day now for almost a year. I know it's hard to believe but it's the truth. Keepin' warm, and staying straight every day.

In contrast, Shorty retreated unilaterally from all sociability. The foil of cocaine that Doc had sold him was completely overwhelmed by the heroin portion of his speedball. His head drooped like a suddenly wilted flower to within centimeters of the same candle flame that he had used to heat up his concoction. For the rest of the night, he nodded heavily. With his entire body swaying imperceptibly back and forth, he remained perched on that invisible opiated seesaw that somehow always holds satisfied junkies in a most precarious balance. Suspended on his heroin high, oblivious to time, he was happily going nowhere – not even capable of falling forward into the candle and burning himself.

Slim and Flex, meanwhile, had rallied all their energies around Flex's crack stem which they were now earnestly sharing, reminding me of pre-teenage buddies huddling around a forbidden cigarette in a school yard. Somehow ferreting out additional stashes of crack from out of the recesses of their pockets, sleeves and hems, they repeatedly lit up tiny chunks of the precious stuff. Each inhalation precipitated a burst of happy chatter. The advantage of the speedball high for crack smokers is that the heroin they inject, or sniff, provides an underlying stabilizing foundation for their coke-induced exaltation. This prevents them from losing control to the hyper-paranoid fantasies that massive, concentrated ingestion of cocaine often induces. Indeed, I have seen non-heroin-using crack smokers suddenly snarl in the streets at their close companions. A friend of mine once started to shriek hysterically after puffing on his crack pipe, begging me to knock the rat off of his back that he thought was biting him. Other acquaintances have hallucinated 'coke bugs' swarming all over their forearms. Laconically on the street, this is called 'bugging out' or 'getting open'.

Only Doc and I clung to any vague pretense of sobriety, but Doc soon changed that by drawing water into his syringe from out of the filthy water jug under the table and then dissolving his jumble of heroin shavings-cum-cocaine in the 'house cooker'. Doc dropped his jeans, shuffled over closer to the fire, squatted in the flickering light, and shot himself up in one of the veins below the knee. The coke part of his speedball mix (what he had taken from out of Shorty's purchase) was the first part of his high to hit him. All of a

sudden he was standing above me at full height, gesturing excitedly. Oblivious to whatever it was that he was telling me, I focused all my attention on the open needle that was clutched in his right hand as he began to pace the small space between me, the table and the fire. To my dismay he began punctuating his more emphatic remarks by jabbing the open needle forward toward me. I thought I saw blood dripping out of the tip into the cold air. Worse yet, he mistook my careful gauging of each one of his gesticulations to be mutual fascination with whatever he was saying, and he kept stepping forward every time I pushed my chair backwards.

Doc's cocaine-inspired needle-waving diatribe proved to be contagious; it galvanized the group back into a single, 'conversating' coke-rushing unit. Following the unpredictable ebbs and flows of the group's contradictory chemical tides, the room's speedball roller coaster dissolved a few minutes later into yet another ebb of heroin-induced relaxation. This seemed to prompt Slim to separate himself from the gallery table and methodically prepare himself for bed. He unfolded a metal cot that had been neatly stacked against the wall behind our table, and then meticulously began unfolding his bed gear. He strategically covered his blankets with swaths of the thick black plastic bags that are used by the New York City Housing Authority sanitation crews to pack household garbage. Underneath his mess of ragged blankets and plastic garbage bags, I could barely discern the unlikely sight of a set of clean-looking white sheets and a matching pillow case. Once his bed clothes were in place, Slim carefully positioned three candles on a tangle of defunct gas pipes jutting incongruously out of the exposed brick wall by his cot. He succeeded in converting the decaying building's hideous innards into an almost attractive futuristic night table. The innumerable floods of rain seeping through the burnt roof and running down the sides of the brick walls created a yuppie's aesthetic delight of tastefully unevenly stripped red brick. Slim almost lovingly lay his crack pipe and Bic lighter safely in the crook of a pipe that was within easy arm's reach of his bedside. He then pulled out the Sunday comics section of the *Daily News* and folded it into convenient quarter-length creases. A change in the wind unloosened a barrage of drizzle drops on to a large paint-splattered clear sheet of plastic that he had wrapped around the bottom third of his cot. He rushed to verify that the plastic covering was securely tucked in under the springs of the cot, and then continued calmly with what was obviously a regular bed-time ritual. He took off his shoes, wrapped his feet in small plastic grocery bags and finally snuggled into bed with a sigh of relief. Except for occasional puffs on his crack pipe and rustles of his newspaper, Slim ceased interacting with the rest of the room. He was safely ensconced in the privacy of his invisible bed-time cocoon. He looked like a schizophrenic cross between an earnest child performing sleep ritual and an emaciated black intellectual getting in a last few licks of reading while puffing on the street version of the Ivy League's briarwood pipe.

Doc, meanwhile, sank, also with a sigh, into the front bucket seat of a long-gone car that he had dragged from out of the back of the shooting

gallery closer to the fire. Only moments later, however, he sat up rigidly to complain about the faltering fire, and announced that someone needed to break up a large hunk of nailed plywood boards that lay near the entrance in order to fit them on to the fire. Flex, presumably still flush from the crack he had been smoking earlier with Slim, jumped to his feet, seized the plywood boards, and began whacking at them with an oversized club of gnarled iron gas piping. His positioning of the plywood on an unstable protruding marble step created the acoustics of an oversized drum. Soon the entire building was echoing with his banging. Our hands over our ears, we shouted at him to stop, but this merely seemed to encourage him to swing faster and harder, sweat flying off of his contorted face.

Slim rose from his cot cursing Flex for risking attracting the attention of the ‘poh-lease’ with his outrageous racket. This flooded me with a new worry: the image of being trapped for three days in an overcrowded New York City ‘bullpen’ waiting to be arraigned by a harried Narcotics Circuit judge. I flashed on the prison rape stories I had been tape-recording in the crackhouse where I normally spent my evenings. The nation’s ‘War on Drugs’ policies of the last half-dozen years, and the growing concentrations of socially marginalized populations in the inner city, spawned by the restructuring of the economy, have turned big city jails throughout the United States into chaotic cesspools. This is exacerbated, of course, by the dramatic statistical rise in poverty rates since the 1980s. As factories move overseas in search of lower labor costs, ever larger proportions of the population in the United States have been pushed into striving to generate incomes through crime and the underground economy. Regardless of the structural causes, I definitely did not want to be dragged into overcrowded custody with my shooting gallery companions. I was also straightforwardly concerned that the fury Flex was pouring into the plywood planks that were refusing to split might follow the illogic of cocaine and overflow unpredictably in my direction. I happened to be the person sitting closest to him, directly in the path of his metal club.

The heroin highs of my companions had long since been swamped by their cocaine-magnified anxieties. My own adrenaline began to pump, once again, as I racked my brains for some kind of instantaneous conflict resolution strategy. Everyone was now furiously cursing Flex for his stupidity, making me even more fearful that the scene might degenerate into a violent free-for-all. Our problems ended suddenly, however, when Flex’s plywood boards finally shattered, allowing him to rip them with his bare hands into burnable hunks.

Panting and wiping his brow, Flex surveyed us proudly. I was surprised to find that everyone was instantly happy with him again. Both Slim and Doc praised him for his hard work, and Doc busily stacked the shredded wood into a neat pile by the fire. I realized that I – rather than my coke-pumped friends – had been the one to become over-anxious and paranoid over the incident. I had misjudged the aggressive street-tone of their shouts and curses. In fact, I was almost embarrassed at myself for my

lapse in street-smart sensitivity. Despite having lived for almost four years in East Harlem, spending most of my nights among dealers and addicts on the street, I still often confuse the nuances of emphasis that distinguish genuinely volatile rage from normally stylized emphatic discourse.

Before the room had settled back down into another heroin ebb to appreciate our revitalized fire, Doc was, once again, coke-rushing on his feet, pacing the gallery to organize 'a run' to the store. Flex, who was penniless, volunteered to be the errand boy and took orders for soda, popcorn, corn chips, candies and candles. To my pleasant surprise, Doc invited me to a beer. As a matter of fact, he insisted that I get a more expensive imported brand rather than the low budget, forever-on-sale malt liquor that I had purchased earlier that night with Mikey. The problem, of course, was finding enough money to pay for everything. Doc was extremely effective at this, however. He publicly approached each person individually and coaxed them into counting out their last few dimes, nickels and pennies. The amount they were asked to contribute was always exactly what the group was 'short' if it was to be able to purchase one last, especially appetizing item.

I was flattered that Doc made a point of not asking me for a contribution. When I tried to dig into my pockets for some change he aggressively ordered me to sit back down. An involuntary snarl crept into his voice as he assured me that I was his guest for the night. When Flex was finally provided with enough money to cover our 'groceries', I jumped up to accompany him through the plywood door. I was bursting to urinate, but had been too scared to leave the protective premises of the shooting gallery all by myself. It was too dark, and the floor too rickety, for me to want to risk any solo ventures through the eerie building.

Flustered at having to deal with something as mundane as a bodily function in this setting, I stepped gingerly out of the beam of candle light that was shining out of the shooting gallery's entrance. Holding my breath I forced myself to take four more steps forward into the pitch black so as not to foul my hosts' main access route. When my eyes began to adjust to the darkness I realized to my horror that the floor just in front of me where I was urinating had indeed fallen through to the basement. My excessive concern over sanitation and personal privacy had almost caused me bodily harm. Meanwhile, discreetly embarrassed, Flex, who had been waiting for me at the back entrance of the building, hurried off through the rubble field surrounding our building when he finally realized what I was doing.

Unfortunately, at almost the same moment that Flex disappeared outside, my companions inside the gallery replaced the plywood plank, thereby blocking the meager rays of candlelight that I had been counting on to light up my return route. Stranded alone in the darkness and the cold, surrounded by gaping holes in the floor, I toyed with the idea of panicking. I tried to remember where I had previously put my feet and imagined how painful it would be to fall into the basement below. When I reached the plywood slab, I remembered how Mikey had warned Doc who he was, and

had specified his and my unusual skin color before stepping into the shooting gallery. I decided it might be politic for me to remind everyone – given the sudden rushes of cocaine-induced anxiety coursing through them – that I was still outside. Consequently, I coughed and pretended to bump against the plywood before very slowly sliding it aside.

If it had not been for the cold, I might have been able to continue enjoying myself in the gallery as Doc's guest of honor. He kept wiping off the shooting table in front of me, restocking the fire, and passing me extra helpings of the salty/sweet packages of Doritos, popcorn, candies and cookies that Flex had brought back from the store. Indeed, our tasty mix of snacks all processed by completely legal multinational corporations paralleled the gallery's cocaine-versus-heroin speedball pleasure principle of maximizing sensory input through contradictory chemicals: salt versus sugar alloyed in fat.

Treated to candy, popcorn, potato chips, Heineken and a preferential seat by the fire – feeling almost nurtured – I remembered my initial 'research aim': to place these most broken down of all marginal street junkies in their historical and structural relationship to mainstream America. I steered the conversation away from their constant references to the logistical particulars of their narcotized lifestyles, and moved it on to the larger array of power constraints ripping apart their lives and destroying their communities. I wanted to explore their relationship to a society that has managed to turn them into the actual agents who devastate themselves and everyone around them, while simultaneously convincing them that they are 'getting over' on the system in a life-long sprint after ecstasy. I veered the discussion, consequently, toward their parents' migration experience from the rural South; the 'chump change' jobs they had held in their youth; and, of course, their experience of racism as African-Americans. Doc's mother, I soon learned, had been forced to flee her sharecropping community in North Carolina when her uncle was lynched. According to Doc he had 'looked at a white woman the wrong way. Yup! They lynch you for things like that down there in Carolina.'

To return our discussion to issues of segregation and resistance in Northeastern post-industrial inner cities, I brought up Malcolm X's name. With almost politically correct pleasure, I noted that the mere mention of his name generated hopeful expectation. Even the semi-conscious, pleasure-groaning woman snapped to attention to murmur her respect for 'the wise man'. Doc jumped to his feet claiming to have known Malcolm. We fell silent, eagerly awaiting for him to expand righteously about the killed leader's street teachings. Instead, however, Doc burst into an uncharacteristically loud chuckle:

Sure, I knew Malcolm. At least I imagine I had to hear him talk all the time, 'cause they tell me he used to be on 125th street. But I wasn't listening. I was too busy picking pockets and robbing people to pay attention.

I had to have heard him though. That's where I worked: 125th and Lenox. I was probably looking into all them people's pockets. Hell! I musta been looking into Malcolm's pocket too.

Doc was proud of his professional skill as a pickpocket who used to 'work' sidewalk crowds rapt in attention before charismatic speakers. He most definitely did not consider himself to be a structural victim of a racist society. He was not interested in confirming a college professor's political-economy analysis of the victimization of the unemployed progeny of rural immigrants, and he certainly did not believe in visions of hopeful struggle or solidarity liberation. His oppression is fully internalized and, almost like a neo-liberal ideologue, he takes full responsibility for his poverty, illiteracy and homelessness.

Realizing that Doc would abort my continued attempts to ferret out the systemic root causes for the devastation all around us, I shifted to personal questions about his relationship to substance abuse. Still suspicious of the bleeding-heart sympathy lurking beneath my questions, Doc cut me short once again with a laconic, 'I started shooting heroin at 14, now I'm 64.'

### **Abandoning the Marginal**

It was now 4:30 in the morning and my legs were shivering uncontrollably from the cold. I decided to retreat. When Doc forced everyone once again to pool their 'last cents' to send Flex out for more industrially processed fat, salt and sugar, I decided to exit with him again, this time for good. I did not want to have to face the abandoned building's hallways alone a second time.

Our goodbyes were almost touching. Pops, who I feared might have long since suffocated, or frozen under his piles of plastic and blankets, rose politely to a sitting position, 'Just ask for me when you knock on the "door". I'm always here even when Doc's gone.' For his part, Doc was visibly sorry to lose me, and kept repeating 'Yeah, yeah, yeah. Come by any time; just ask for Doc or Pop – no problem. No problem. You hear [snarled]?' I looked all the way around the room into each set of eyes, nodding and smiling. Only Slim and the groaning woman did not respond. Slim was finally asleep, snuggled under his covers, the joyous bright African colors of his wool cap were barely illuminated by one of the last flickering candles on his gas pipe night table. The groaning woman was still awake, but in too deep and happy an ebb of oblivion to warrant disturbing.

I hurried behind Flex, trying to follow directly in his footsteps. As we ducked through the broken bricks and found ourselves in the open rubble field, I allowed myself for a fleeting moment to worry that Flex might be tempted to mug me, now that we were beyond the controlling influence of the shooting gallery. He was younger than everyone else, and all evening long the gallery patrons had righteously complained about the unpredictable irresponsibility of today's youth. I soon felt guilty, or more precisely, like a bad ethnographer for misjudging Flex's character so blatantly. He became even gentler and more shy once we were one-on-one and away from Doc's



domineering personality. After clasping his hand and wishing him good luck, I hurried home through the 2 inches of fresh, powdery snow that had fallen while I had been inside. Like most people in the United States who find themselves shivering on the street late at night in mid-winter, I tried not to think of homeless drug addicts anymore.

### **Conclusion: Confronting Inner-City Apartheid**

There might be an obvious explanation for the ecstatic self-destruction of such a vast number of African-Americans and Latinos in the heart of the greatest cities of the United States. Inner-city public sector breakdown is overwhelming. The miles and miles of abandoned buildings and rubble-strewn lots of vacant garbage are powerful testimony to a profound infrastructural crisis. There has been no concerted attempt by the government to intervene in this obvious misery. Neither the private sector nor the state pretends to function or to care about places like East Harlem. More objectively, the disproportionate ethnic-specific statistics on male homicide, infant mortality, childhood hunger and homelessness also clearly point to a profoundly racist political economy that flourishes on extreme levels of social marginalization.

While most US citizens recognize and decry this macro-structural context for extreme urban poverty, few are able to relate it in a coherent or political manner to the violence and suffering festering at the very cores of their financial capitals. US ideology has little or no definition of public responsibility to maintain a citizenry's human rights. Instead, individual civil liberties reign supreme and the state spends vast sums on its police security apparatus. The populace cannot help but subscribe wholeheartedly to an individualistic blame-the-victim interpretation of poverty. Psychological deficiencies are thought to be at the root of social crisis and marginalization. At best, larger-scale, socially based explanations for poverty limit themselves to critiquing the errant cultural orientations of the poor. The public sector invests in building prisons.

Worse yet, within the inner city itself, the obvious objective horrors enveloping the community – inadequate jobs, racism and inferior public services – are understood and acted upon in a *mea culpa* fashion. For example, a social critic could interpret Doc, the manager/owner of the shooting gallery, to be the personification of southern racial violence and forced migration. Of course, Doc has a specific individualized etiology – such as perhaps an abusive mother, incompetent school teachers, deficient role models, the personal insult of being poor, no real job alternatives, hipster street-friend influences, or specific racist confrontations – to account for his internally directed violence and his social demobilization. At the same time, it is impossible to argue with the fact that being a shooting gallery manager/owner in an abandoned building is a better alternative to being lynched in one's mother's hometown for 'smiling sideways at white folk'. Regardless of the good historical and structural reasons for Doc's degradation, he has become the most proximate agent for 'black genocide' in

his community through his oppositional pursuit of personal satisfaction and nurturance. He passes out HIV-positive house needles because he is too cheap and out of control to keep a bottle of Clorox handy and because he has no running water. At the same time, he is thrilled at the opportunity to treat an occasional white visitor to a bottle of Heineken.

Most people in the United States subscribe to a popularized version of the 'culture of poverty' theory to explain Doc's existence. Of course, among academics, the culture of poverty approach which was formally developed by Oscar Lewis in the very same neighborhood, East Harlem, where these field notes were collected, has been rigorously – and polemically – critiqued for its internal inconsistencies, its middle-class bias, its ethnocentrism and its obfuscation of structural dynamics. Nevertheless, despite the negative consensus on the culture of poverty among scholars who study the inner city in the United States, no coherent theoretical framework has effectively supplanted the concept. Most critiques have tended towards economic reductionism or have ultimately minimized the reality of profound suffering and destruction – some of it internalized – that enmeshes a large share of the urban poor.

Alternative interpretations of misery and oppression need to rechannel the debates around culture and poverty to more exciting theoretical arenas that reframe material reality's relationship to ideology and redefine how social process emerges beyond that static bipolar distinction between structure and agency. Perhaps because I am limited by anthropology's arbitrary methodological boundaries, I remain firmly committed to ethnography as a key to understanding extreme social suffering. At the same time, however, I have been forced to recognize the potentially obfuscating perspective that the ethnographic endeavor imposes. Most obviously, immersing oneself full time in extreme and disorienting settings such as the apartheid worlds of crack and intravenous heroin is a frightening and personally draining experience. On an immediate descriptive level, given the tremendous ideological polarization around poverty studies in America, raw ethnographic data risks fueling racist stereotypes and ever popular blame-the-victim convictions, no matter how much truth one speaks to power. On a deeper, theoretical level, ethnography can systematically distort an analytic perspective into being a self-contained jumbled morass of individualistic relationships that mask historical process and deny larger structural-power relations.

Specific aspects of life in the underground economy are easy to account for. Naked expressions of violence, for example, can be reinterpreted as judicious public investments in 'human capital'. Dealers, addicts and just plain 'wannabe's' are obliged to engage periodically in visible displays of aggression if they are to maintain any credibility on the street. Should they fail, they will be mugged, ripped-off and ridiculed.

The underground economy and the social relations thriving off of it in the USA are best understood as modes of resistance to social and material marginalization, but this resistance is predicated upon the self-destruction

of the inner-city community: substance abuse and violence. This dynamic is especially depressing for the long-term ethnographer to document because the complex dynamic whereby resistance to oppression leads to self-destruction is interpreted by the larger society – and indeed by inner-city residents as well – as irrefutable proof that the habitués of crack houses or shooting galleries are just – to use the words of a southern white sheriff in *Mississippi Burning*, a Hollywood drama of American racism – ‘a bunch of nigga’s running wild shooting up their own asshole’. The physical violence imploding East Harlem is largely self-contained: ‘black/(brown) on black/(brown)’. The occasional severe brutality of the racist white police officer pales before the terror or distrust most residents hold for their neighbors.

In other parts of the world, when my fieldwork has confronted me with intense brutality and violence, the distressing cruelty and pain served to clarify the dynamics of oppression for the victims rather than to confuse them and to paralyze them as it does in the case of America’s inner cities. For example, in the shooting gallery when Slim asks Pop to ‘shoot’ him in the neck, he considers it a favor. Pop, a superannuated dope fiend who is proud of his skill, is only too happy to oblige. Similarly the young mother who was shot a half-dozen times with a sawed off shotgun in front of my window early in my fieldwork was assumed by my neighbors and myself to have more or less ‘deserved’ her fate even though she left behind a 3-year-old daughter. After all, what could she have expected? – she had smoked up the consignment of crack she was supposed to have sold.

The closest my neighbors on the street in front of my apartment came to understanding that particular mother’s murder in terms of their relationship to the larger society was in the grumbles of the rubber neckers that the woman might have lived had the ambulance arrived faster and had the emergency technician not paused to put on rubber gloves before pressing shut the severed artery in her neck. Given America’s intensely racial idiom, the clear ‘white vs black’ dichotomy which might have made this scene clearer is obscured. For example, it might be true that the ambulance could have arrived sooner, but the driver, his First Aid companion, and probably the telephone operator who I reported the shooting to on the emergency 911 telephone line were all Latino or African-American just like the woman dying in the pool of blood. Everyone ends up hating themselves and their people as much as the system. Furthermore, the First Aid technician who had trouble pulling on his gloves while blood gushed from the pierced artery in the dying woman’s neck was not racist. He was following bureaucratic instructions for protecting himself from the HIV virus rampant in the blood of street-murdered women in New York – his people’s blood.

Similarly, all the discussions of jail that I have tape-recorded confirm that the worst part of the prison experience is not the guards, or the bars, or the wretched food, or the racist, humiliating judges and lawyers – i.e. the objectively oppressive institution – but rather the fellow inmates. As on the street, in prison it is the victims themselves who are the most ruthless and effective administrators and agents of violence and terror. This is the most

misunderstood and crucial dimension of oppression. Inmates throughout history and the world become the enforcers and executors of the most barbaric dimensions of their own torture. Street-life confronts us with a recurrent version of the Nazi holocaust nightmare that humanity cannot escape and refuses to face: the *Sonderkommandos* (gas chamber death squads) were Jewish. If we overlook or ignore this dimension for fear of contributing to racist stereotypes or out of a sensitive respect for a community's reputation, we deny one of the most fundamental premises of the experience of oppression.

Why is the street so overwhelming? The multi-billion-dollar drug industry – the only growing equal-opportunity employer in America's inner cities since the mid-1970s – offers an obviously powerful material base for what could be called 'street culture'. The stakes are extraordinarily high, and it would be atheoretical to think that such dramatic economic vigor could be neutral ideologically or culturally. For example, at heroin copping corners such as the chain link fence in Jefferson Park or in the children's playground in front of the administrative headquarters of East Harlem's public school system on 117th Street, the money literally flows in fistfuls. Within minutes, a hundred junkies can be served and dozens of bundles of heroin distributed. It is hard to understand why education officials act surprised and worried that this neighborhood has one of the highest school drop-out rates in the country when all this is going on right outside the School District's office windows. The elementary school children are treated to this spectacle every single day on their way to and from school. Similarly, during the early 1990s it was physically impossible to walk from any of East Harlem's subway stations to the gate of the neighborhood's 'magnet' high school without walking through a drug-copping corner. Meanwhile, amidst the Census Bureau's statistics boasting some of the nation's highest poverty rates, public assistance dependency rates, etc., skinny men in sneakers with holes spend \$20, \$40, even \$50 without flinching for a half dozen or so hours of psychic and physical relief.

The drug economy, especially retail crack sales, outcompeted the legal, entry-level economy for the hearts and minds of inner-city youth in the 1990s. The children growing up in my tenement were not disorganized or apathetic. On the contrary, they were overly organized and energetic. Their mobilization and ambition, however, destroys both themselves and their community. The most determined, lucky and ruthless are running \$1000 a day sales networks and are not yet 18. They keep regular hours and supervise half a dozen employees who work on consignment or for an hourly wage. According to police records, millions of dollars worth of drug sales are going on within a stone's throw of the youths living in my building. Why should we be surprised when they drop out of school to 'get a piece of mine's'? And why should we wonder why they refuse low prestige jobs in the service sector in favor of building up crack/cocaine enterprises where their identities rooted in street culture become an asset rather than a liability?

Like any ‘normal Americans’, the dealers believe with a vengeance in the Great American Dream: rags to riches through private entrepreneurship. Most will not succeed, however. They will be crushed in their endeavor and they will probably fall prey to drug addiction, the prison-industrial complex and/or a paralyzing depression. This does not stop those who do succeed from driving their Mercedes, Jaguars and Porsches up to the fire hydrant at the curb to be washed and waxed by local crack addicts while they stand triumphantly 10 yards away and watch the children on the block ogle their ‘ride’ (car).

These same people worked in their youth in the legal labor market. They know what they are escaping. Every single crack dealer and heroin addict that I have befriended has worked at one or more legal jobs in their childhood. In fact, most violated child labor laws in their eagerness to get to work. Before they were 12 years old, they were bagging groceries at the supermarket for tips, stocking beers off-the-books in local corner grocery stores or shining shoes. In fact, many dropped out of school in order to make money to obtain the childhood ‘necessities’ – candy, potato chips, sneakers, basketballs, baseball cards – that most pre-teenagers are able to buy with their allowance money.

The material alternative to entry-level employment that the drug industry offers could explain all by itself the powerful appeal of street culture. Any formidable economic base is bound to spawn a cultural or ideological dimension. In the case of street culture, however, racism in the USA conflates with the economically generated appeal of the street to create an even more dynamic and persuasive alternative to white bourgeois culture. This has been exacerbated by the transition from a manufacturing to a finance service-based economy. Service jobs require unconditional submission to bourgeois culture. Street culture has no place or power at work in high-rise office corridors. The inner-city resident who does not faithfully imitate white middle-class society’s modes of interaction will be fired – or, worse yet, ridiculed into submission. In other words, the inner city’s would-be working class is systematically humiliated when it seeks employment downtown in the finance service sector. The street, therefore, offers both a real economic alternative and also an ideological framework that promises pride and self-esteem.

The extraordinary vitality of cultural expression on the poorest, most despised streets in the United States is best understood as an oppositional reaction to the conjugation of racism and marginalized employment. The resulting cultural appeal is undeniable; it even crosses class, ethnic and national boundaries. The music, dance, clothing, styles and argot emerging out of Harlem ironically have been a driving force in fashion and mainstream popular culture both nationally and internationally. Contradictorily, however, on the street where this alternative framework is inextricably rooted in drugs and in the violence that drug dealing requires, the result is a self-destruction and community havoc that cements the status quo of gross socioeconomic inequality.

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