

INTRODUCTION

Man, I don't blame where I'm at right now on nobody else but myself.

Primo

I was forced into crack against my will. When I first moved to East Harlem — “El Barrio”¹ — as a newlywed in the spring of 1985, I was looking for an inexpensive New York City apartment from which I could write a book on the experience of poverty and ethnic segregation in the heart of one of the most expensive cities in the world. On the level of theory, I was interested in the political economy of inner-city street culture. From a personal, political perspective, I wanted to probe the Achilles heel of the richest industrialized nation in the world by documenting how it imposes racial segregation and economic marginalization on so many of its Latino/a and African-American citizens.

I thought the drug world was going to be only one of the many themes I would explore. My original subject was the entire underground (untaxed) economy, from curbside car repairing and baby-sitting, to unlicensed off-track betting and drug dealing. I had never even heard of crack when I first arrived in the neighborhood — no one knew about this particular substance yet, because this brittle compound of cocaine and baking soda processed into efficiently smokable pellets was not yet available as a mass-marketed product.² By the end of the year, however, most of my friends, neighbors, and acquaintances had been swept into the multibillion-dollar crack cyclone: selling it, smoking it, fretting over it.

I followed them, and I watched the murder rate in the projects opposite my crumbling tenement apartment spiral into one of the highest in Manhattan.³ The sidewalk in front of the burned-out abandoned

building and the rubbish-strewn vacant lot flanking each side of my tenement began to crunch with the sound of empty crack vials underfoot. Almost a decade later, as this book goes to press, despite the debates of the "drug experts" over whether or not the United States faces a severe "drug problem," this same sidewalk continues to be littered with drug paraphernalia. The only difference in the mid-1990s is that used hypodermic needles lie alongside spent crack vials in the gutter. Heroin has rejoined crack and cocaine as a primary drug of choice available in the inner city as international suppliers of heroin have regained their lost market share of substance abuse by lowering their prices and increasing the quality of their product.⁴

The Underground Economy

This book is not about crack, or drugs, per se. Substance abuse in the inner city is merely a symptom – and a vivid symbol – of deeper dynamics of social marginalization and alienation. Of course, on an immediately visible personal level, addiction and substance abuse are among the most immediate, brutal facts shaping daily life on the street. Most importantly, however, the two dozen street dealers and their families that I befriended were not interested in talking primarily about drugs. On the contrary, they wanted me to learn all about their daily struggles for subsistence and dignity at the poverty line.

According to the official statistics, my neighbors on the street should have been homeless, starving, and dressed in rags. Given the cost of living in Manhattan, it should have been impossible for most of them to afford rent and minimal groceries and still manage to pay their electricity and gas bills. According to the 1990 census, 39.8 percent of local residents in East Harlem lived below the federal poverty line (compared to 16.3 percent of all New Yorkers) with a total of 62.1 percent receiving less than twice official poverty-level incomes. The blocks immediately surrounding me were significantly poorer with half of all residents falling below the poverty line.⁵ Given New York City prices for essential goods and services, this means that according to official economic measures, well over half the population of El Barrio should not be able to meet their subsistence needs.

In fact, however, people are not starving on a massive scale. Although many elderly residents and many young children do not have adequate

diets and suffer from the cold in the winter, most local residents are adequately dressed and reasonably healthy. The enormous, uncensured, untaxed underground economy allows the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers in neighborhoods like East Harlem to subsist with the minimal amenities that people living in the United States consider to be basic necessities. I was determined to study these alternative income-generating strategies that were consuming so much of the time and energy of the young men and women sitting on the stoops and parked cars in front of my tenement.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, slightly more than one in three families in El Barrio received public assistance.⁶ The heads of these impoverished households have to supplement their meager checks in order to keep their children alive. Many are mothers who make extra money by baby-sitting their neighbors' children, or by housekeeping for a paying boarder. Others may bartend at one of the half-dozen social clubs and after-hours dancing spots scattered throughout the neighborhood. Some work "off the books" in their living rooms as seamstresses for garment contractors. Finally, many also find themselves obliged to establish amorous relationships with men who are willing to make cash contributions to their household expenses.

Male income-generating strategies in the underground economy are more publicly visible. Some men repair cars on the curb; others wait on stoops for unlicensed construction subcontractors to pick them up for fly-by-night demolition jobs or window renovation projects. Many sell "numbers" – the street's version of offtrack betting. The most visible cohorts hawk "nickels and dimes" of one illegal drug or another. They are part of the most robust, multibillion-dollar sector of the booming underground economy. Cocaine and crack, in particular during the mid-1980s and through the early 1990s, followed by heroin in the mid-1990s, have been the fastest growing – if not the only – equal opportunity employers of men in Harlem. Retail drug sales easily outcompete other income-generating opportunities, whether legal or illegal.⁷

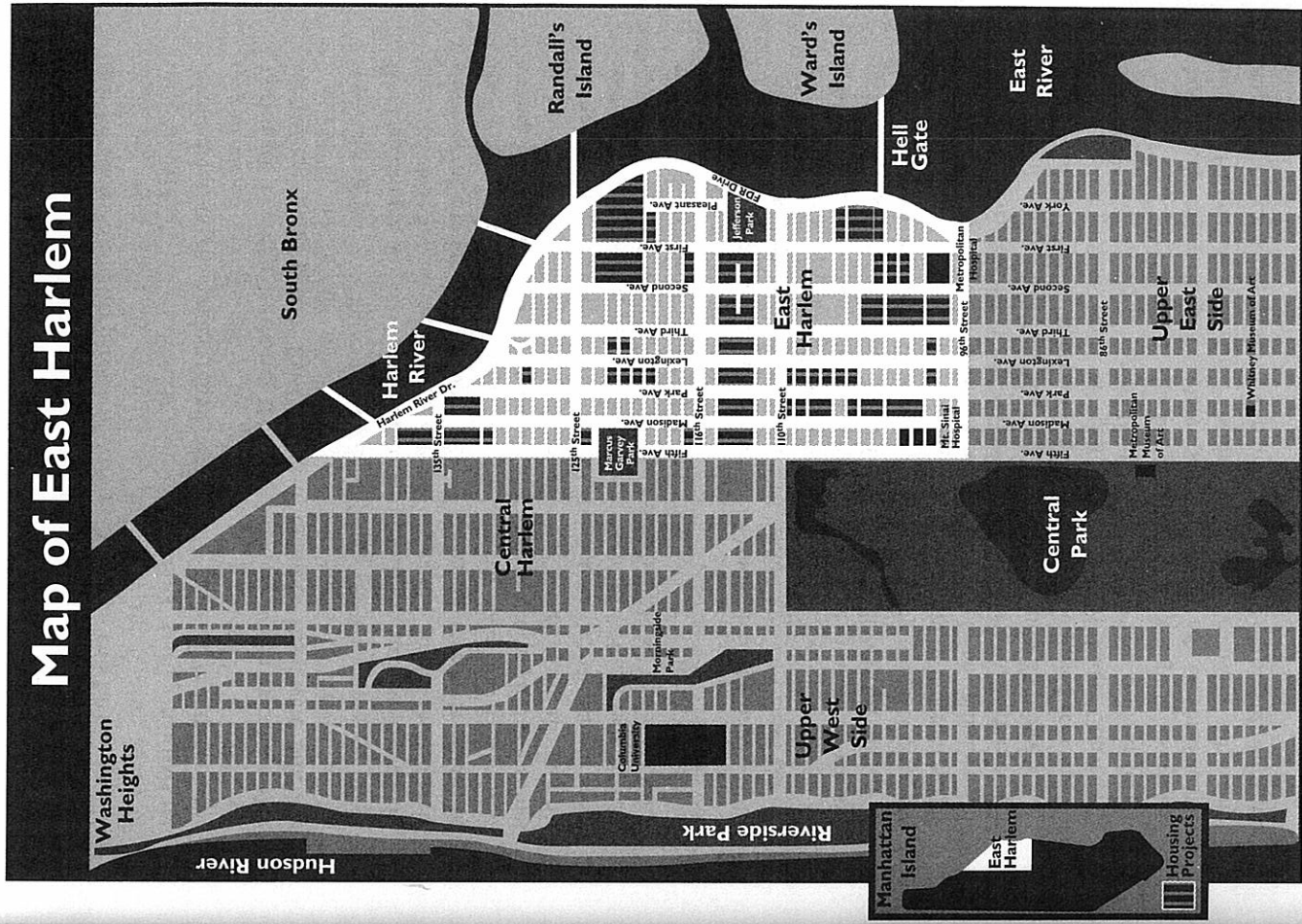
The street in front of my tenement was not atypical, and within a two-block radius I could – and still can, as of this final draft – obtain heroin, crack, powder cocaine, hypodermic needles, methadone, Valium, angel dust,⁸ marijuana, mescaline, bootleg alcohol, and tobacco. Within one hundred yards of my stoop there were three competing crackhouses selling vials at two, three, and five dollars. Just a few blocks farther

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down, in one of several local "pill mills," a doctor wrote \$3.9 million worth of Medicaid prescriptions in only one year, receiving nearly \$1 million for his services. Ninety-four percent of his "medicines" were on the Department of Social Services' list of frequently abused prescription drugs. Most of these pills were retailed on the corner or resold in bulk discounts to pharmacies. Right on my block, on the second floor above the crackhouse where I spent much of my free time at night, another filthy clinic dispensed sedatives and opiates to flocks of emaciated addicts who waited in decrepit huddles for the nurse to raise the clinic's unidentified metal gates and tape a handwritten cardboard DOCTOR IS IN sign to the linoleum-covered window. I never found out the volume of this clinic's business because it was never raided by the authorities. In the projects opposite this same pill mill, however, the New York City Housing Authority police arrested a fifty-five-year-old mother and her twenty-two- and sixteen-year-old daughters while they were "bagging" twenty-one pounds of cocaine into \$10 quarter-gram "jumbo" vials of adulterated product worth over \$1 million on the street. The police found \$25,000 cash in small-denomination bills in this same apartment.

In other words, millions of dollars of business takes place within a stone's throw of the youths growing up in East Harlem tenements and housing projects. Why should these young men and women take the subway to work minimum wage jobs — or even double minimum wage jobs — in downtown offices when they can usually earn more, at least in the short run, by selling drugs on the street corner in front of their apartment or school yard? In fact, I am always surprised that so many inner-city men and women remain in the legal economy and work nine to five plus overtime, barely making ends meet. According to the 1990 Census of East Harlem, 48 percent of all males and 35 percent of females over sixteen were employed in officially reported jobs, compared to a citywide average of 64 percent for men and 49 percent for women.⁹ In the census tracts surrounding my apartment, 53 percent of all men over sixteen years of age (1,923 out of 3,647) and 28 percent of all women over sixteen (1,307 out of 4,626) were working legally in officially censused jobs. An additional 17 percent of the civilian labor force was unemployed but actively looking for work compared to 16 percent for El Barrio as a whole, and 9 percent for all of New York City.¹⁰

The difficulty of making generalizations about inner-city neighborhoods on the basis of official U.S. Census Bureau statistics cannot be



Sources: Housing Environments Research Group, City University of New York; Kevin Kearney, New York City Department of City Planning

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overemphasized. Studies commissioned by the Census Bureau estimate that between 20 and 40 percent of African-American and Latino men in their late teens and early twenties are missed by the Census. Many of these individuals purposely hide their whereabouts, fearing reprisals for involvement in the underground economy.¹¹ A good example of the magnitude of concealment in the inner city is provided by a 1988 New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) report, which calculates that 20 percent more people lived on their premises than were officially reported in the official rolls. The Housing Authority arrived at this "estimate of overcrowding" by cross-tabulating statistics from the Welfare Department and the Board of Education with the increase in expenditures of their maintenance departments.¹² On the blocks immediately surrounding my tenement a vague idea of how many men were missed by the Census is provided by the imbalance between males and females over sixteen years of age: 3,647 versus 4,626. In other words, if one assumes an equal ratio of males to females, 979 men, or 27 percent of the number counted, were missing. In New York City as a whole, 18 percent more men over sixteen years of age would have been needed for there to be a perfect balance between adult males and females. Using this same yardstick of men to women, in El Barrio as a whole 36 percent of all men were "missed."

The difficulty of estimating the size of the underground economy — let alone drug dealing — is even thornier.¹³ By definition, no Census Bureau data exists on the subject. Because fewer households than individuals are missed by the Census in urban settings, one possible measure for the size of the underground economy is the figure for households that declare no "wage or salary income." This provides only the very roughest comparative measure for the size of the underground economy in different neighborhoods because some households survive exclusively on retirement income or on strictly legal self-employment revenues. Furthermore, this proxy figure measures drug dealing even more tenuously since many, perhaps most, of those households that rely on the untaxed economy for supplemental income, work at legal tasks and shun drugs. Conversely, many people involved in the underground economy also work at legally declared jobs. Nevertheless, one has to assume that a high proportion of households with no wage or salary income probably rely on some combination of untaxed, undeclared income in order to continue subsisting, and that drug dealing represents an important source of this supplemental

Table 1. Comparative Social Indicators by Neighborhood from 1990 Census

	% males > 16 missing to balance # of females > 16	% h-holds with no wage or salary income	% females employed > 16	% males employed > 16	% h-holds receiving public assistance	% residents below poverty	% African- American	% Puerto Rican	Total population	
Crack House micro-neighborhood	27	46	28	53	42	49	33	56	11,599	East Harlem
New York City	36	40	35	48	34	40	39	52	110,599	New York City
	18	26	49	64	13	19	25	12	7,322,564	

Sources: New York City Department of City Planning, Population Division 1992 [August 26]; New York City Department of City Planning 1993 [March]; New York City Department of City Planning 1993 [December]; 1990 Census of Population and Housing Block Statistics.

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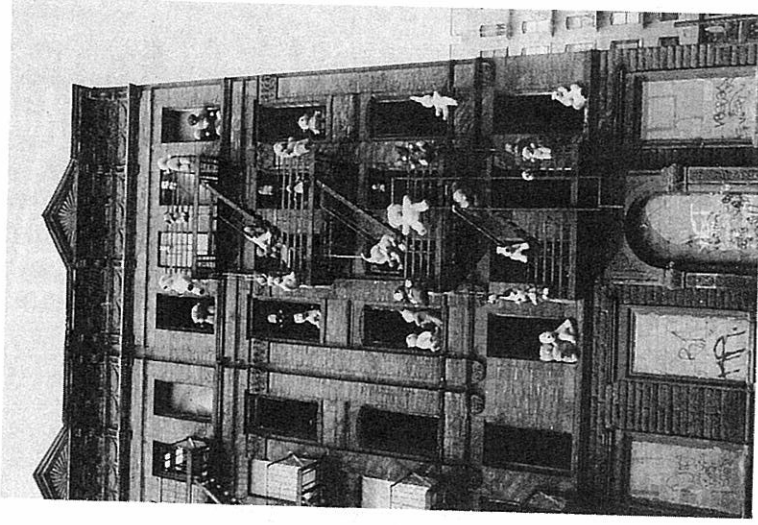
income. In any case, according to official Census Bureau statistics, 40 percent of all households in El Barrio as a whole received no legally declared wages or salary, compared to 26 percent for New York City as a whole. The blocks immediately surrounding my apartment were probably slightly more enmeshed in the underground economy, with only 46 percent of the 3,995 households reporting wage or salary income. The percentage of households receiving public assistance is another useful figure for gauging the relative size of the underground economy, since no household can survive on welfare alone and any legal income reported by a household receiving public assistance is deducted from its biweekly welfare check and its monthly food stamps allotment. On the blocks surrounding my tenement 42 percent of all households received public assistance compared to 34 percent in East Harlem as a whole and 13 percent for all households in New York City.¹⁴

Street Culture: Resistance and Self-Destruction

The anguish of growing up poor in the richest city in the world is compounded by the cultural assault that El Barrio youths often face when they venture out of their neighborhood. This has spawned what I call "inner-city street culture": a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society. Street culture offers an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity. In the particular case of the United States, the concentration of socially marginalized populations into politically and ecologically isolated inner-city enclaves has fomented an especially explosive cultural creativity that is in defiance of racism and economic marginalization. This "street culture of resistance" is not a coherent, conscious universe of political opposition but, rather, a spontaneous set of rebellious practices that in the long term have emerged as an oppositional style. Ironically, mainstream society through fashion, music, film, and television eventually recuperates and commercializes many of these oppositional street styles, recycling them as pop culture.¹⁵ In fact, some of the most basic linguistic expressions for self-esteem in middle-class America, such as being "cool," "square," or "hip," were coined on inner-city streets.

Purveying for substance use and abuse provides the material base for contemporary street culture, rendering it even more powerfully appealing

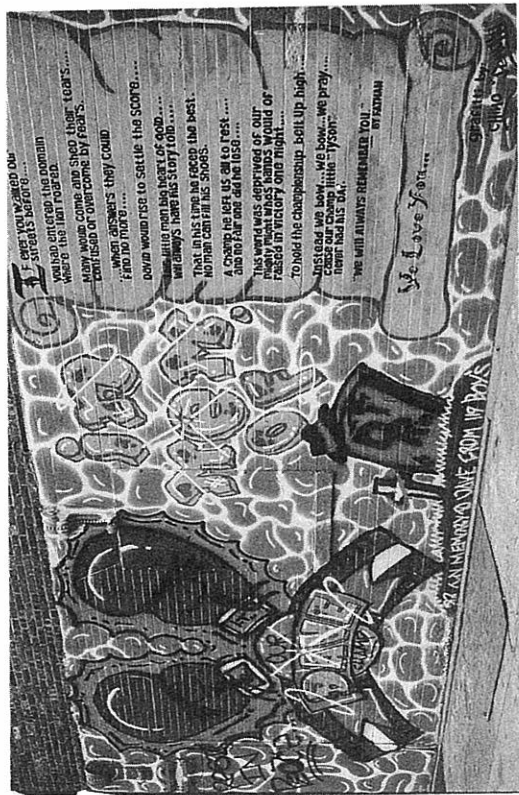
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Repopulating El Barrio: The stuffed animals were arranged by the former superintendent of this abandoned building to protest the decay of his block, which had become a haven for drug dealing. Photo by Henry Chalfant.

than it has been in previous generations. Illegal enterprise, however, embroils most of its participants in lifestyles of violence, substance abuse, and internalized rage. Contradictorily, therefore, the street culture of resistance is predicated on the destruction of its participants and the community harboring them. In other words, although street culture emerges out of a personal search for dignity and a rejection of racism and subjugation, it ultimately becomes an active agent in personal degradation and community ruin.

As already noted, it is impossible to calculate with any accuracy what



Memorial to a youth murdered not far from the Game Room. He had aspired to be a professional boxer. Photo by Oscar Vargas.

proportion of the population is involved in the untaxed, underground economy. It is even harder to guess the number of people who use or sell drugs. Most of El Barrio's residents have nothing to do with drugs.¹⁶ The problem, however, is that this law-abiding majority has lost control of public space. Regardless of their absolute numbers, or relative proportions, hardworking, drug-free Harlemites have been pushed onto the defensive. Most of them live in fear, or even in contempt, of their neighborhood. Worried mothers and fathers maintain their children locked inside their apartments in determined attempts to keep street culture out. They hope someday to be able to move out of the neighborhood.

The drug dealers in this book consequently represent only a small minority of East Harlem residents, but they have managed to set the tone for public life. They force local residents, especially women and the elderly, to fear being assaulted or mugged. The sight of emaciated addicts congregating visibly on street corners provokes pity, sadness, and anger among the majority of East Harlemites who do not use drugs. Most important, on a daily basis, the street-level drug dealers offer a

persuasive, even if violent and self-destructive, alternative lifestyle to the youths growing up around them.

No matter how marginal they may be in absolute numbers, the people who are carving out hegemony on inner-city streets cannot be ignored; they need to be understood. For this reason, I chose addicts, thieves, and dealers to be my best friends and acquaintances during the years I lived in El Barrio. The pathos of the U.S. inner city is most clearly manifested within the street dealing world. To borrow the cliché, "in the extraordinary we can see the ordinary." The extreme – perhaps caricatural – responses to poverty and segregation that the dealers and addicts in this book represent, afford insight into processes that may be experienced in one form or another by major sectors of any vulnerable population experiencing rapid structural change in the context of political and ideological oppression. There is nothing exceptional about the Puerto Rican experience in New York, except that the human costs of immigration and poverty have been rendered more clearly visible by the extent and rapidity with which the United States colonized and disarticulated Puerto Rico's economy and polity. On the contrary, if anything is extraordinary about the Puerto Rican experience, it is that Puerto Rican cultural forms have continued to expand and reinvent themselves in the lives of second- and third-generation immigrants around a consistent theme of dignity and autonomy. Indeed, some Puerto Rican scholars refer to this as Puerto Rico's "oppositional mentality," forged in the face of long-term colonial domination.¹⁷

Ethnographic Methods and Negative Stereotyping

Any detailed examination of social marginalization encounters serious problems with the politics of representation, especially in the United States, where discussions of poverty tend to polarize immediately around race and individual self-worth. I worry, consequently, that the life stories and events presented in this book will be misread as negative stereotypes of Puerto Ricans, or as a hostile portrait of the poor. I have struggled over these issues for several years because I agree with those social scientists who criticize the inferiorizing narratives that have predominated in much of the academic and popular literature on poverty in the United States.¹⁸ At the same time, however, countering traditional moralistic biases and middle-class hostility toward the poor should not

come at the cost of sanitizing the suffering and destruction that exists on inner-city streets. Out of a righteous, or a "politically sensitive," fear of giving the poor a bad image, I refuse to ignore or minimize the social misery I witnessed, because that would make me complicitous with oppression.¹⁹

This book consequently confronts the contradictions of the politics of representation of social marginalization in the United States by presenting brutal events, uncensored as I experienced them, or as they were narrated to me, by the perpetrators themselves. In the process, I have tried to build an alternative, critical understanding of the U.S. inner city by organizing my central arguments, and by presenting the lives and conversations of the crack dealers, in a manner that emphasizes the interface between structural oppression and individual action. Building on the analytic framework of cultural production theory and drawing from feminism, I hope to restore the agency of culture, the autonomy of individuals, and the centrality of gender and the domestic sphere to a political economic understanding of the experience of persistent poverty and social marginalization in the urban United States.

As I have already noted, traditional social science research techniques that rely on Census Bureau statistics or random sample neighborhood surveys cannot access with any degree of accuracy the people who survive in the underground economy – and much less those who sell or take illegal drugs. By definition, individuals who have been marginalized socially, economically, and culturally have had negative long-term relationships with mainstream society. Most drug users and dealers distrust representatives of mainstream society and will not reveal their intimate experiences of substance abuse or criminal enterprise to a stranger on a survey instrument, no matter how sensitive or friendly the interviewer may be. Consequently, most of the criminologists and sociologists who painstakingly undertake epidemiological surveys on crime and substance abuse collect fabrications. In fact, one does not have to be a drug dealer or a drug addict to hide the details of one's illicit activities. Even "honest" citizens, for example, regularly engage in "underground economy" practices when they finesse their deductions on income tax returns. In short, how can we expect someone who specializes in mugging elderly persons to provide us with accurate data on his or her income-generating strategies?

The participant-observation ethnographic techniques developed pri-

marily by cultural anthropologists since the 1920s are better suited than exclusively quantitative methodologies for documenting the lives of people who live on the margins of a society that is hostile to them. Only by establishing long-term relationships based on trust can one begin to ask provocative personal questions, and expect thoughtful, serious answers. Ethnographers usually live in the communities they study, and they establish long-term, organic relationships with the people they write about. In other words, in order to collect "accurate data," ethnographers violate the canons of positivist research; we become intimately involved with the people we study.

With this goal in mind, I spent hundreds of nights on the street and in crackhouses observing dealers and addicts. I regularly tape-recorded their conversations and life histories. Perhaps more important, I also visited their families, attending parties and intimate reunions – from Thanksgiving dinners to New Year's Eve celebrations. I interviewed, and in many cases befriended, the spouses, lovers, siblings, mothers, grandmothers, and – when possible – the fathers and stepfathers of the crack dealers featured in these pages. I also spent time in the larger community interviewing local politicians and attending institutional meetings.

The explosion of postmodernist theory in anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s has critiqued the myth of ethnographic authority, and has denounced the hierarchical politics of representation that is inherent to anthropological endeavors. The self-conscious reflexivity called for by postmodernists was especially necessary and useful in my case: I was an outsider from the larger society's dominant class, ethnicity, and gender categories who was attempting to study the experience of inner-city poverty among Puerto Ricans. Once again, my concerns over these complicated issues are conveyed in my contextualization and editing of the tape-recorded crackhouse conversations. In fact, they are reflected in the very structure of the book.

While editing thousands of pages of transcriptions I came to appreciate the deconstructionist cliché of "culture as text." I also became acutely aware of the contradictory collaborative nature of my research strategy. Although the literary quality and emotional force of this book depends entirely on the articulate words of the main characters, I have always had the final say in how – and if – they would be conveyed in the final product.²⁰

Having raised the specter of poststructural theoretical critiques, I must now express my dismay at the profoundly elitist tendencies of many postmodernist approaches. Deconstructionist "politics" usually confine themselves to hermetically sealed academic discourses on the "poetics" of social interaction, or on clichés devoted to exploring the relationships between self and other. Although postmodern ethnographers often claim to be subversive, their contestation of authority focuses on hyperliterate critiques of form through evocative vocabularies, playful syntaxes, and polyphonous voices, rather than on engaging with tangible daily struggles. Postmodern debates titillate alienated, suburbanized intellectuals; they are completely out of touch with the urgent social crises of the inner-city unemployed. Scholarly self-reflection often degenerates into narcissistic celebrations of privilege. Most important, however, radical deconstructionism makes it impossible to categorize or prioritize experiences of injustice and oppression. This subtly denies the very real personal experience of pain and suffering that is imposed socially and structurally across race, class, gender, sexuality, and other power-ridden categories.

Irrespective of the petty theoretical infighting of academic intellectuals, the unique insights provided on the methodological level by the participant-observation techniques of cultural anthropology are further fraught with fundamental analytical and political tensions. Historically, ethnographers have avoided tackling taboo subjects such as personal violence, sexual abuse, addiction, alienation, and self-destruction. Part of the problem is rooted in anthropology's functionalist paradigm, which imposes order and community on its research subjects. Furthermore, the methodological logistics of participation-observation requires researchers to be physically present and personally involved. This encourages them to overlook negative dynamics because they need to be empathetically engaged with the people they study and must also have their permission to live with them. This leads to an unconscious self-censorship that shapes the research settings and subjects anthropologists choose to study. It is easier to obtain the "informed consent" of the individuals one is writing about if one is addressing relatively harmless, "quaint" subjects. Finally, on a more personal level, extreme settings full of human tragedy, such as the streets of East Harlem, are psychologically overwhelming and can be physically dangerous.

Anthropology's obsession with the "exotic other" has discouraged an-

thropologists from studying their own societies and puts them at risk of exoticizing what they find when they study close to home; hence, I guarded myself consciously in this work from a voyeuristic celebration of street dealers and inner-city street culture. The dearth of ethnographic research on devastating urban poverty, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, is also related to the fear — addressed earlier — of succumbing to a pornography of violence that reinforces popular racist stereotypes. Most ethnographers offer sympathetic readings of the culture or people they study. Indeed, this is enshrined in the fundamental anthropological tenet of cultural relativism: Cultures are never good or bad; they simply have an internal logic. In fact, however, suffering is usually hideous; it is a solvent of human integrity, and ethnographers never want to make the people they study look ugly. This imperative to sanitize the vulnerable is particularly strong in the United States, where survival-of-the-fittest, blame-the-victim theories of individual action constitute a popular "common sense." The result, as I have noted, is that ethnographic presentations of social marginalization are almost guaranteed to be misread by the general public through a conservative, unforgiving lens. This has seriously limited the ability of intellectuals to debate issues of poverty, ethnic discrimination, and immigration. They are traumatized by the general public's obsession with personal worth and racial determinism.

In the United States there are few nuances in the popular understanding of the relationships between social structural constraints and individual failure. As a result, intellectuals have retreated from the fray and have unreflexively latched on to positive representations of the oppressed that those who have been poor, or lived among the poor, know to be completely unrealistic. Indeed, I have noticed this when presenting the main arguments of this book in academic settings. Progressive and often cultural nationalist colleagues — who are almost always middle class — often seem to be incapable of hearing the arguments I am making. Instead, some react in outrage at superficial images taken out of context. It is as if they are so terrified of the potential for "negative connotations" that they feel compelled to suppress complex, unpleasant messages before even listening to them. Ironically, many of their criticisms in these public academic settings embody central dimensions of precisely what I am trying to convey in these pages about the individual experience of social structural oppression.

Critiquing the Culture of Poverty

El Barrio and the Puerto Rican experience in the United States has generated a disproportionately large literature. Puerto Ricans have been called the "most researched but least understood people in the United States."²¹ The last major ethnographic work in El Barrio to receive national attention was Oscar Lewis's *La Vida* in the mid-1960s, and it illustrates perfectly the problems inherent in ethnographic method and in life history case studies more specifically. In fact, *La Vida* as well as Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report on the Negro family are frequently cited as the studies that scared a generation of social scientists away from studying the inner city.²² Lewis collected thousands of pages of life-history accounts from one extended Puerto Rican family in which most of the women were involved in prostitution. The "culture of poverty" theory that he developed out of this – and other – ethnographic data from Mexico, focused almost exclusively on the pathology of the intergenerational transmission of destructive values and behaviors among individuals within families. Lewis's approach is rooted in the Freudian culture and personality paradigm that dominated anthropology in the 1950s. He fails to note how history, culture, and political-economic structures constrain the lives of individuals. With the advantage of thirty years of hindsight, it is easy to criticize Lewis for his overly simplistic theoretical framework. Class exploitation, racial discrimination, and, of course, sexist oppression, as well as the subtleties of contextualized cultural meanings are not addressed in Lewis's psychologically reductionist descriptions of desperately poor Puerto Rican immigrants. Nevertheless, despite its lack of scholarly rigor, Lewis's compellingly written book on daily life in El Barrio and the shantytowns of Puerto Rico became a best seller in the United States, where it resonated with Protestant work ethic notions of rugged individualism and personal responsibility. Despite the author's progressive political intent and his personal sympathy for the socially marginal, critics interpret his volume as confirming the deep-seated contempt for the "unworthy" poor that permeates U.S. ideology.

It is no accident that it was an anthropologist who coined the concept of the culture of poverty and focused data collection on individual behavior. The simple practical fact of the discipline's methodology – participant-observation – gives it access to documenting individual actions in

minute detail. Structures of power and history cannot be touched or talked to. Specifically, in the New York City Puerto Rican context, the self-destructive daily life of those who are surviving on the street needs to be contextualized in the particular history of the hostile race relations and structural economic dislocation they have faced. Embroiled in what seemed like a whirlpool of suffering during my ethnographic research, it was often hard for me to see the larger relationships structuring the jumble of human interaction all around me. In the heat of daily life on the streets of El Barrio I often experienced a confusing anger with the victims, the victimizers, and the wealthy industrialized society that generates such an unnecessarily large toll of human suffering. For example, when confronted with a pregnant friend frantically smoking crack – and possibly condemning her future baby to a life of shattered emotions and dulled brain cells – it did no good for me to remember the history of her people's colonial oppression and humiliation, or to contextualize her position in New York's changing economy. Living in the inferno of what the United States calls its "underclass," I, like my neighbors around me and like the pregnant crack addicts themselves, often blamed the victim.

Political economy analysis is not a panacea to compensate for individualistic, racist, or otherwise judgmental interpretations of social marginalization. In fact, a focus on structures often obscures the fact that humans are active agents of their own history, rather than passive victims. Ethnographic method allows the "pawns" of larger structural forces to emerge as real human beings who shape their own futures. Nevertheless, I often caught myself falling back on a rigidly structuralist perspective in order to avoid the painful details of how real people hurt themselves and their loved ones in their struggle for survival in daily life. Again, this analytical and political problem can be understood within the context of the theoretical debate over structure versus agency, that is, the relationship between individual responsibility and social structural constraints. The insights from cultural production theory – specifically, the notion that street culture's resistance to social marginalization is the contradictory key to its destructive impetus – is useful to avoid reductionist structuralist interpretations. Through cultural practices of opposition, individuals shape the oppression that larger forces impose upon them.²³

The difficulty of relating individual action to political economy, combined with the personally and politically motivated timidity of ethnogra-

phers in the United States through the 1970s and 1980s have obfuscated our understanding of the mechanisms and the experiences of oppression. I cannot resolve the structure-versus-agency debate; nor can I confidently assuage my own righteous fear that hostile readers will misconstrue my ethnography as "giving the poor a bad name." Nevertheless, I feel it imperative from a personal and ethical perspective, as well as from an analytic and theoretical one, to expose the horrors I witnessed among the people I befriended, without censoring even the goriest details.²⁴ The depth and overwhelming pain and terror of the experience of poverty and racism in the United States needs to be talked about openly and confronted squarely, even if that makes us uncomfortable. I have documented a range of strategies that the urban poor devise to escape or circumvent the structures of segregation and marginalization that entrap them, including those strategies that result in self-inflicted suffering. I have written this in the hope that "anthropological writing can be a site of resistance," and with the conviction that social scientists should, and can, "face power."²⁵ At the same time, as already noted, I continue to worry about the political implications of exposing the minute details of the lives of the poor and powerless to the general public. Under an ethnographic microscope everyone has warts and anyone can be made to look like a monster. Furthermore, as the anthropologist Laura Nader stated succinctly in the early 1970s, "Don't study the poor and powerless because everything you say about them will be used against them."²⁶ I do not know if it is possible for me to present the story of my three and a half years of residence in El Barrio without falling prey to a pornography of violence, or a racist voyeurism — ultimately the problem and the responsibility is also in the eyes of the beholder.

VIOLATING APARTHEID IN THE UNITED STATES

We love listening to you talk. It makes us laugh. You sound just like a television advertisement.

giggling eight-year-old

My research on the streets of Spanish Harlem almost came to a disastrous end just after the halfway point when I inadvertently "disrespected" Ray, the man who owned the crackhouses where I spent much of my time between 1985 and 1990. It was just after midnight, and Ray was visiting his most profitable sales point to make sure the manager of the late-night shift had opened punctually. Business was booming and the heavyset, thirty-two-year-old Puerto Rican crack entrepreneur was surrounded by his coterie of employees, friends, and wanna-be acquaintances — all eager for his attention. We were on the corner of 110th Street by the entrance to the Lexington Avenue subway station right in front the abandoned four-story tenement building occupied by Ray's dealers. He had camouflaged the ground floor as an after-hours bootleg social club and pool hall. Ray and many of his employees had grown up in this very tenement before its Italian owner burned it down to collect its insurance value. Their corner has long been nicknamed "La Farmacia" because of the unique diversity of psychoactive substances available: from standard products like heroin, Valium, powder cocaine, and crack to more *recherché*, offbeat items like mescaline and angel dust.¹

Learning Street Smarts

In retrospect I wince at my lack of street smarts for accidentally humiliating the man who was crucial not only to my continued access to the crack

IN SEARCH OF RESPECT

Selling Crack in El Barrio

Second Edition

PHILIPPE BOURGOIS

University of California, San Francisco

