

Introduction

BY THE EARLY 1990S, the South Bronx had changed. On my visits home from an upstate community college, I noticed that more and more neighborhoods had dried up. The “crackheads” and “crack whores” were gone, along with the drug peddlers who had barked: *Red Top! Gold Top! I got Blue!* Someone had cleaned the streets, dusting the drug dealers and drug users off the planet, leaving the South Bronx a ghost town. *Coño, que pasó?*

Eventually, my sociological interests landed me at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Since I still lived in the South Bronx, it was easy to stay in touch with neighborhood friends. So I often visited their homes, went out for drinks, and hung out on street corners. Mostly, we reminisced about the good ol’ days, going on and on about the old adventures and loves. Sometimes, though, they would ask me to go with them to see “this kid” or “this dude” about something. On the way, they would explain the meeting’s purpose: to set up a drug deal or organize a drug robbery.

Once the “meeting” started, I stayed away from it, leaning on cars or brick walls several feet away. I wanted no blame if they were busted by police. *I didn’t hear nothin’, so I don’t know nothin’, papa.* I still got the lowdown afterward. My friends just wanted my opinion and support—my: *You’re right, bro.* Yet I kept seeing how their new crack and cocaine ventures always failed. Their only success was in drug robberies and they began calling themselves “stickup kids,” or *joloperos*. Soon I heard stories of them beating, burning, and mutilating dealers for drugs and cash.

Then the irony struck me. For the last several years, criminologists and politicians had been debating the big crime drop of the 1990s. In cities across the United States, crimes such as murder, robbery, rape, car theft, and assault had dropped dramatically. New York City, in particular, had experienced

crime lows not recorded in thirty years.¹ Public officials cited tougher policing and more incarceration. Criminologists cited several factors: a shrinking crack market, a change in youth attitudes toward crack, a natural drug cycle, community initiatives, improved policing, and a reduction of people in the crime-prone years.²

At the same time, I was witnessing an alarming phenomenon in the South Bronx, a phenomenon that was not revealed by crime statistics: an increase in unreported drug violence. Unable to sell drugs within a shrinking crack market, some former dealers had become violent drug robbers. And since these offenses occurred within a crime market, the victims never reported them to police. I saw a double irony. First, at a time when reported violent crime was dropping, unreported violence within the drug world seemed to be rising. Second, violence had increased among men who were in their late twenties—beyond the “crime-prone” years. This observation countered the statistical picture as well as common criminological wisdom.

I told Pablo of my research interests, and he suggested that I hang out several blocks away, where Gus, another old friend, was staying. There, I met other drug market participants—Neno, Topi, and David—who mostly relied on stickups to earn money. Drug market insiders recruited them to rob drug dealers storing large amounts of cocaine, marijuana, heroin, or cash. Little did I know that I would be embarking on a tumultuous journey. I would learn about violent drug robberies, but I would also witness the self-destruction of these Dominican men.

Over the next several years, I observed them ride a violent roller coaster that ended in a horrific crash. As crack dealers, they had never been so brutal. But in the drug robberies, beating, burning, and maiming became routine. Worse, their economic uncertainties made them anxious, depressed, and suicidal—made them Fallen Stars.

Que pasó? How would I explain their rising violence and their self-destructive turn?

Sociologically, I started framing them within a declining manufacturing sector, a worn-down community, and a shrinking crack market. For more insights, I turned to the latest qualitative, interview-based robbery research. Its researchers, though, sped the other way, framing their work within emotions and street culture. I became concerned with their rare mention of social inequalities, shifting drug markets, or a punitive state.

To clarify this unease, I must do a theoretical rewind to one of the most pivotal years in criminological thought: 1988. In a thrilling tour de force,

sociologist Jack Katz argued that economic swings, racial discrimination, and social position mattered little in understanding crime.³ Instead, the emotional allure of evil mattered most. Regardless of social class, he argued, criminals were sensually attracted to deviance, to acts that, like brilliant fireworks splashing against a midnight sky, exhilarated them.

To make his case, Katz argued that since robberies provide only sporadic income—and if the robber is caught, a lot of prison time—then robbers must be seeking more than just money. For instance, why would some robbers do grocery shopping while holding up a supermarket? Or why would some of them sexually assault a waitress while holding up a bar? In short, why would some robbers increase their risks during a robbery? It was, Katz argued, because risk-taking behavior itself is thrilling.

But there was more. For Katz, robberies were just one piece of a larger life of illicit action: a life of heavy gambling, heavy drug use, heavy drinking, heavy spending, and heavy sex. At the extreme, these behaviors led to money woes, which then led to robberies as the logical—read: chaotic and thrilling—solution.

Almost overnight, enthralled researchers followed Katz’ lead, leaping over the root causes of crime. By 1992, criminologists Neal Shover and David Honaker had devised the concept of “life as a party” to explain crime among property offenders.⁴ By the mid-1990s, other criminologists—Richard T. Wright, Scott Decker, and Bruce A. Jacobs—were following this path in their interview-based studies of St. Louis street criminals. Crime, they concluded, resulted from the allure of both street culture and emotional thrills.

Their assumption that “street culture” was distinct—or disconnected from mainstream culture—disturbed me.⁵ In particular, I was disturbed when I read statements like the following about the criminal world (I’m paraphrasing):

1. Nothing is done for free, for no money.
2. Flashing material success is a goal.
3. Drinking and drug use are serious recreations.
4. Men pursue sex with many women.

It seemed as though they had never hung out on a college campus or in a local bar. It seemed as though they had never paid attention to the Wall Street or Orange County crowds. It seemed as though they had no idea of the individualistic and materialistic foundation of the United States. Worse, it

seemed as though they had gone back in time, to the days when cultural reasons alone were believed to explain why the poor remained poor and engaged in crime. Thus, rather than situating Katz' ideas within structural factors such as poverty, social class, and the economy, some researchers would *strictly* ride down the emotional and cultural landscape of crime.⁶

Not that I, too, wasn't taken by Katz' work. His writing was electric and metaphoric. His emphasis on emotional thrills was novel, inspiring. And as later chapters show, I use his ideas to understand drug robberies. Also, I use the insightful ideas of the aforementioned robbery researchers. In terms of in-the-moment robbery dynamics, they did magnificent work.

Still, their goal was to mine deeper into street culture, and even deeper into the emotional fulfillment of doing evil. By the expedition's end, however, the analytical canary was dead. They could not answer how a given offender's biography was tied to the criminal underworld. They could not explain how that criminal underworld had emerged. Everything was just there, always existing—the evil, the streets, the drugs, the violence.

The emotional-cultural box, I came to realize, had to be opened to let in the dazzling lights of historical, social, economic, and drug market forces. Otherwise, readers would have to believe in magic: criminals had just popped up out of thin air. Because at the turn of the twentieth century, when White ethnics were *the* inner-city crime problem, street culture and evil surely existed.⁷ Yet as the century progressed, White street crime would decrease dramatically.

Wait. If evil emotions and criminal cultures are as powerful and entrenched as some criminologists claim, how did Whites exorcize those crooked-faced demons? Answer: Historical moments and structural shifts. World wars. Unions. Booming industries. Ignoring such factors is not the sociological promise as I see it. Instead, it is almost a criminological sleight of hand.

I take a cue from C. Wright Mills, situating the Dominican drug robbers I observed within a salient historical moment.⁸ This is not only my sociological promise, but also my promise to the study participants. Because when I ask them about their rising violence and depression, of their sense of being "trapped," their answers are limited to what Mills referred to as their "private orbits." Like most people, they fail to grasp the "big picture" and rely on day-to-day experiences to understand their lives. But larger structural transformations—such as a shifting drug market—had influenced and shaped them too. Because:

When a drug market rises, a struggling college student becomes a drug dealer; a tough kid, an enforcer; a poor building superintendent, a lookout; and a dishwasher, a drug kingpin. When a drug market expands, a mother mourns her dead dealer son; a dad laments his drug-using daughter; a child visits a parent imprisoned by the state. When a drug market peaks, an ill-affected sibling becomes a social worker; a storefront preacher, a community organizer; a stay-at-home mom, an after-school volunteer. When a drug market fades, an ex-con is perpetually unemployed; a recovering female addict, forever humiliated; a New York City mayor, despite doing nothing special, applauded and praised.

And during the crack era, some of my Dominican study participants became crack dealers. Like typical Americans, they badly wanted money, power, and material status symbols, everything the U.S. ideology claims as real success. And through crack, they succeeded. Cash, cars, women, and clothes—they got them. Status, masculinity, and respect—they got those too. These men were Kings.

But by the mid-1990s, their reign had ended; the crack era, without warning, was gone. And that salient moment would remain within them, becoming the eternal barometer of their marginal lives. They then became drug robbers. They then became more violent rather than aging out of crime. True, in their everyday orbits, they sounded and appeared as some criminologists would have it. But the crack era—and its demise—framed their emotions, their violence, and their crime.⁹

Following C. Wright Mills' call to examine the big picture, I use Robert Merton and Cloward and Ohlin's "strain" theories to make sense of the study participants. In his classic statement, Merton argued that when people lack access to the approved ways of achieving society's sacred values and goals, they may feel a strain, or pressure, to break the rules.¹⁰ As a result, a frustrated few become *innovators*, creating criminal paths to success. Cloward and Ohlin added that the *existence* of innovative opportunities mattered too.¹¹ So along with factors such as race and gender, the absence or presence of criminal opportunities shaped *if* and *how* a frustrated person innovated to do crime.

Under strain theory, I could integrate these South Bronx Dominicans within the historical context of the crack era. Crack's rise during the 1980s had swiftly changed the city's criminal opportunity structure. Now, as long as they had the start-up capital, thousands of marginal residents could turn to the drug market for American-style success.¹² And these Dominican men took advantage of this new opportunity and, in time, lived a material life

that most South Bronx residents could only dream.¹³ Drug dealing became their best bet at overcoming the great American contradiction: the strong cultural emphasis on achieving the American Dream, yet the reality that little legal opportunity existed for its achievement. However, during the 1990s, the crack market shrank and reduced their drug-dealing opportunities. They then responded to this new “strain” through an *extraordinary innovation*: becoming stickup kids who earned money through brutality and violence. In all, strain theory helped me place Jack Katz’ emphasis on crime’s emotional allure within a larger frame.

In this book, I describe and analyze the drug robbery violence of South Bronx Dominicans. Politically, this leads to *un tremendo problema*. Some readers may feel that I reinforce popular negative imagery of Dominicans. Their questions will be: Why study stickup kids, a group that is hardly representative of the South Bronx Dominican community? Why not study legal Dominican workers, like cab drivers, sales clerks, or *bodega* owners?

Given the conservative backlash against inner-city minorities, I understand those concerns. I can only respond by saying that I grew up with these Dominican drug market participants, so I care about them personally as much as I do sociologically. Also, I understand the great challenges in studying a vulnerable population, especially the danger of falling into psychological or sociopathic frameworks. This is why I go beyond pure interpretive ethnography and show how brutal drug robberies do not happen within a cultural vacuum.

Moreover, throughout the book, I present the study participants as complete human beings. Like most people, they juggle multiple statuses and roles: they are fathers to children, brothers to siblings, and sons to mothers and fathers. They experience economic hardship and romantic problems. They laugh, they cry, they have legal hopes and dreams. They show many mental and physical symptoms related to social distress.

They also engage in violence, which I cannot omit.

I am studying *drug market participants* who came of age during the crack era.¹⁴ Specifically, I examine the crack market’s varied negative consequences on one of its populations. Because the rise and fall of crack affected different parts of the drug market population in different ways: for some it led to committed crack use; for some, it led to crack-related sex work; for some it led to being the victims of beatings, stabbings, and shootings; and for others, it led to long-term incarceration. For the study participants, it led to becoming drug robbers, the worst perpetrators of violence in the drug world.

Thus this book is about a particular group of people, but it also speaks to the generational cohort of Black and Latino/a men and women across the country who lived through the crack era. It speaks to the individuals who invested their young adulthood in the crack game and now cannot find legal spaces to apply their drug-specific cultural capital. It speaks to the economic issues facing the prisoners of the harsh, politically charged drug laws, who, on returning home, find that incarceration prepared them poorly for capable citizenship.¹⁵ It speaks to those who have, in both a real and a symbolic sense, experienced “social death.”¹⁶

The book is divided into three parts. In part 1, I contextualize the drug dealing and drug robberies I observed, discussing the South Bronx decline and the rise of crack, the study participants’ trajectory into the crack market, their brutal jail and prison experiences, and their drug robberies as a response to a shrinking crack market. In part 2, I analyze drug robbery dynamics—its stages, accomplishment, and violence (the place where most robbery studies start and stop). Thus, I explain gender roles, torture, and status within drug robberies, and drug robbery lifestyles on the street. In part 3, I explore the final outcome of study participants’ drug market involvement. Specifically, I show how these men became fallen stars—how they became suicidal and self-destructive as they made sense of their diminished drug market status.

But first: the South Bronx, the participants—and a methodological note that I avoided until I no longer could.

THE STICKUP KIDS AND ME

Between April and September, and lately in October, the number 4 train carries tens of thousands of city residents to its most celebrated stop, “161st Street, Yankee Stadium.” Mostly White fans from all over the city come to watch the magnificent Yankees play baseball. Clad in Yankee caps, T-shirts, and jerseys, they engorge the local area, forming a dizzying sea of blue and white and pinstripe. They visit fast-food joints, cafes, pubs, and Yankee retail shops.

Then they attend the game.

Surely, these visitors never get beyond one block of Yankee Stadium. Not that they should. The west side of Yankee stadium borders a highway, and to its south stands a filthy marketplace where vegetable and fruit merchants sell produce to wholesale customers.¹⁷ By the afternoon hours, the market is empty except for the occasional emaciated prostitute trying to score a John. To its north, the retail and food shops end abruptly, not daring to step into local neighborhoods.

Only the stadium itself crosses local borders. At night, its bright lights illuminate the local sky, a cherubic glow seen for several miles. And if the Yankees score a run, strike a batter out—or do anything spectacular—the unison cheers of fans are electrifying, momentarily muting the sounds of the streets, the cars, the radios, and the chatter of people. For an instant, local residents pause to think about the cause for such jubilation. Then they carry on.

Other than stadium sights and sounds, local people routinely encounter the rumble of the number 4 train. On a quivering platform, this silver metallic fleet of cars shoots through the entire Jerome Avenue. On the platform's east side, past the first uphill block, is the borough's administrative center. It holds the county courthouse and the offices of the borough president, district attorney, and county clerk. Farther up, across the Grand Concourse—past the historic Concourse Plaza Hotel—are the family and criminal courts.

Now on the west side of the elevated train platform, and immediately north of the stadium, is John Mullay Park. The three-block public park offers a worn outdoor running track, a Little League baseball diamond, and an undersized pool. Running parallel to the park's west side is a lonesome area the city books call "High Bridge." The neighborhood seems to have it all: elegant art deco buildings, a scenic view of the city park, and a daytime atmosphere resembling the Bronx's northern, upscale sections. Still, the decorative mosaic that adorns the structures is covered in soot, and the sidewalks are worn and uneven, a checkerboard of grays.

But in between two buildings stands a public good: a steep, four-flight cement stairwell. The stairs act as a shortcut for residents living on the perched city blocks behind the street. Otherwise, they would have to circle about three long, uphill blocks to reach those neighborhoods. In all, other than traffic heading toward the highway and a bridge, the neighborhood is peaceful, with little pedestrian activity.

And that is most of it. Unless I include a local *bodega*, or grocery store, that operates out of an art deco building next to the public stairwell. By day,

the *bodega* caters to working poor Mexicans, Central Americans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans. By night, though, the *bodega* attracts a certain Dominican male clientele. These mostly young Dominicans gather outside its entrance and on the public stairwell to listen to its blasting *merengue* music, drink liquor and bottled beer, argue about sports, gamble with dice, or play cards. Sometimes they sell marijuana, heroin, or cocaine. But that business is slow—so slow that drug transactions are not obvious. Their only obvious crime is smoking *hierba*, or marijuana.

Their main work takes them far from the neighborhood, deep into other boroughs, onto other streets, inside other apartments, where they beat, choke, and burn people. Simply put, they rob drug dealers holding large amounts of drugs and cash. And if you ask them in Spanish, they describe themselves as *joloperos*. In English: stickup kids.

Researching Violence: A Night in the Life

Nightfall. The neighborhood air was hot, thick, and sticky, New York City style. It was so muggy that people perspired after walking just a few feet. The aroma of the damp street was also strong, a mixture of car fumes, moisture, and sidewalk. But a light breeze came in from the park that brought us momentary relief.

Block residents left stuffy apartments and were scattered everywhere. In front of the first building, several mothers sat on parked cars and talked while watching their children play street games. Kids just learning to walk (the ones that fall easily) played with bottle tops, empty wrappers, and empty soda cans. They threw them as far as they could, at parked cars, or at each other. Other kids hopped from one sidewalk square to another, trying to skip over the dividing lines. Sometimes they bumped into each other, sometimes they fell.

Older kids rode bikes in zigzags or raced. Their recklessness almost caused collisions with people standing around. *That little nigga better watch that shit*, warned a young male. *Yo, shorty, watch that bike!* Others played tag, running in circles, dodging each other, hiding behind pedestrians, trying to avoid being "it." *You're it!* Sometimes, the older ones cheated by going into the street. Running through a maze of cars, they made drivers honk horns and laughed at how the others could not follow. *Stop cheatin'! I'm not playin' any more*, the sidewalk kids pleaded. Yet they all kept playing.

Neighborhood teens, mostly males, separated into groups that sat or leaned on old cars without alarms. Their owners never fussed about scratches or dents. A smaller group smoked weed and drank beer on the block's far side to avoid neighborhood gossip. But most just talked, joked, and listened to rap music from a parked car nearby. The car's radio played Big Punisher's rap album throughout the night.

*From San Juan to Bayamón,
I'm the Don Juan beside the Don,
Live long,
Get your party on,
Don't let the liquor fool you,
'Cause I'll stick you,
Something sharp to the heart,
Or somethin' big to move you.*¹⁸

Some young Dominican guys played cards on car hoods and gambled dice against the storefront. They always played for money, for those wrinkled, crunched-up dollar bills they sometimes threw to the ground. The winner, who usually grinned ferociously, turned solemn-faced as he counted and straightened the bills. Then another round of dice started. When a player tried to leave early, especially after winning, others urged him to stay. They wanted to win their money back. *Where you goin'? Don't leave yet. Come on, let's play again.*

Now and then, a player trotted backward toward the sidewalk's edge, glancing left and right to detect police cars.

Nearby, Pablo, Tukee, Dee, and I prepared mixed drinks. The liquor for tonight was "99 Banana" rum and Tropicó, mixed with orange juice. We drank, joked, and listened to music blasting from the *bodega*. The grocery store played classic *merengues* from the 1980s, popularized by Dominican singers like Fernandito Villalona:

*Vamos pronto darno un trago
Que está noche es la mas buena...*¹⁹

Showing off, a young Dominican guy sometimes danced alone, smiling as he improvised steps. All grin, he chopped his steps, from side to side, jabbing each fist sideways, giving us no clue to his next move. Suddenly, he lunged forward, then stepped back twice in staccato. We were all happy faces. Pablo slapped him a five. "*Coño, tu ere' el mae'tro,*" Pablo said. "*Diablo 'mano—vi'te eso?*"

It was the perfect summer night to hang out—people were chatting, people were laughing, people were smoking, people were gambling, people were drinking. And some, I should add, were preparing for a drug hit.

While some of us drank on the public stairwell, Gus, David, and Neno stood across the street, by the park, going over the details of a *tumbe* (drug robbery). With them was Jonah, a drug robber everyone said was *loco*. He was using a tall Jeep—the getaway car—to hide his cocaine snorts. Shortly, Melissa appeared, and as they had earlier in the park, her body proportions caught everyone's attention—she was petite from the waist up, and voluptuous from the waist down, with protruding buttocks. Within a half-hour of her arrival, she was driven off to set up the drug dealer.

Throughout that emotionally charged night, Gus repeatedly updated us on Melissa's progress, informing us on how far the dealer had fallen into her trap. For instance, at one point, Gus told us, "Yo, this nigga [the driver] just called, ha-ha."

"He called?"

"Yeah."

"What he said?"

"He said that she was makin' out with that nigga [the dealer], ha-ha. They sittin' at a table and they makin' out and shit. Yo, that nigga's fuckin' drunk already, ha-ha-ha. He been buyin' all these drinks for her and shit, ha-ha, and they been drinkin' all this time. He's all over her, all drunk and shit, ha-ha-ha. Yo, that nigga's an old man and he thinks he gonna get some young ass tonight! That nigga's gonna get a big surprise, bro! What you think, Randy?"

"He's goin' d-o-o-o-w-n," I answered, inebriated.

After a few hours of such updates, the driver appeared and drove Gus, Jonah, and David to the apartment where they would later sequester and brutally torture the dealer.

By three o'clock in the morning, Pablo, Dee, Topi, Tukee, and I were the only ones hanging out on the block. We had just finished the liquor and waited for the crew to return. I asked Pablo if he thought they would find anything or get any information out of the dealer.

"Yo Ran," a drunken Pablo answered, "all they gotta do to that motherfucka is put a hot iron on his fuckin' ass, bro! Nah, in fact, they just gotta put a hot fuckin' hanger in his ear, bro. You know what a hot hanger would do to you, bro? Yo, like we did to one motherfucka one time, bro. Yo, that nigga didn't want to talk so we said, 'A'ight, you don't want to fuckin' talk, bro? A'ight.' Yo, we fuckin' heated a fuckin' hanger on the stove and then put that shit [the uncoiled wire] in his ear, bro. That nigga started talkin' fast! Ha, ha. He was like, 'Okay, okay, okay!' Ha, ha, ha. You shoulda seen that nigga, bro."

"Listen, man," Tukee added, in his cool style, "all you gotta do is tie that nigga up with some duct tape, boom, wrap that shit up all around his arms, his legs, and be like, 'Just tell me where everything's at, B[ro]. We know what you got, B. If you don't tell us where everything's at, we gonna have to do some th-i-i-n-n-g-s-s to you, B. You know what I'm sayin'? So, just tell us where everything's at and everything's gonna be alr-i-i-g-h-t.' Ha-ha-ha. And if that nigga don't say shit, just smack that nigga up a little bit, B, ha-ha. And if he still don't talk, B, 'Gonna have to turn the iron on,' and be like, 'Now I'm gonna have to make you tell me, B.' Just put that shit on his back and everything's gonna be alr-r-i-i-g-h-t. 'Oh, now you know what I'm talkin' about, B? I thought you didn't know, B.' Ha-ha."

By sunrise, only Pablo, Dee, and I remained on the block. We still talked about everything young drunk guys talk about when they break night waiting to see what has come out of a drug hit their boys were in. Women. Cars. Sports. Torture. Drugs. At 8:00 A.M., though, I told the guys that I was leaving. *They still haven't come back and I'm tired, bro*, I explained.

Nigga, you just pussy-whipped, pssh-pshhh, Pablo joked, imitating a whipping sound.

Nah, man, I'm tired.

Yeab, nigga. Just admit it bro, you whipped, ha-ha. Nigga, I'm only playin', ha-ha. I'm ready to break the fuck out too. I'm goin' to Neida's [his girlfriend's apartment].

Pablo gave Dee and me fistfist handshakes and quickly walked away. Still walking, Pablo turned halfway and yelled, *Yo, Ran, I'll let you know what happens tomorrow, a'ight? Call me. Don't forget, call me, nigga.*

I walked home, six blocks away.

I already knew some of the stickup kids in this scene. During the 1980s, I lived in a nearby South Bronx neighborhood with Pablo, Gus, and Tukee. In fact, Pablo and I spent lots of time together during summers and after school. Since Gus was three years younger (a huge span in teen years), we had a closer relationship with his older brother, Sylvio, who eventually became a big-time drug dealer. But after Gus proved his daring (he shot some people), we hung out with him too. Tukee also lived in our neighborhood, but then moved a few blocks to the High Bridge area, where most of the research is based. But since he visited often, we kept our friendship tight.

I met David, Topi, and Neno through Gus on a winter night in 1999. Gus introduced them to me outside a local pool hall as they got set to do a drug robbery. They were young and Dominican, only spoke Spanish, and wore the latest urban, baggy clothes. Meeting them like this, on the eve of a drug robbery, gave me a head start on some key robbery aspects. For instance, here I first learned of the role of "the girl" as I spoke with Pablo, who had accompanied me. This critical robbery role was sometimes played by Melissa, whom I would meet a few months later.

Initially, I recorded my observations through extensive field notes. However, after about three months, I began using a medium-sized tape recorder, which just fit into my jacket or pants pocket. The tape recorder improved my recollection of events since I often got back home in the early morning, usually intoxicated from heavy drinking. Nevertheless, I wrote up extensive outlines before going to bed (which sometimes took over two hours) and then wrote elaborate field notes the next day. These notes supplemented and guided the tape recordings, especially since street sounds sometimes interfered with the sound quality, and sometimes weeks passed before I found time for transcription. I followed this pattern intensely (about three or four days a week) between 1999 and 2002; then again for the autumn of 2003 and winter of 2004; and then intermittently from the summer of 2004 to the present.

The tape recorder also took on a critical social role during the research, especially with Pablo and Gus. After getting used to it, they often eagerly asked if I was carrying it with me and searched for the tell-tale bulge in my jacket or pants pocket. During conversations or interviews, they often spoke to the tape recorder—or to the world "out there"—rather than to me. Sometimes, the tape recorder was therapeutic, letting the study participants voice their hopes, dreams, sadness, and anger in ways they never had. They even cried.

As to participant dialogue, I only put tape-recorded conversations in quotation marks.²⁰ All italicized dialogue is based on field notes. This lets the reader know whether a conversation is precise (or close to it) or relied on memory alone. In both instances, I edited or removed long or confusing dialogue, like the run-on sentences with no clear beginning, middle, or end. Also, I sometimes removed extra slang or colloquialisms like, "You know what I'm sayin'?" and "You feel me?" and "bro" and "yo." Although not distracting (to me) in real conversation, too many of them on paper may distract readers from a dialogue's meaning.

Also, some study participants only spoke Spanish. In such cases, I translated their accounts into English; they are so identified in the text. However, the translations stripped those accounts of their richness. To avoid a total loss, I sometimes kept in Spanish slang, phrases, and words. Moreover, I retained ungrammatical speech and mispronunciations, especially their tendency to skip the letter "s" at the middle or end of words. In the latter case, I placed apostrophes to indicate the absence of letters and purposely spelled some words according to their sound. Although purists may complain, I must maintain the lyrical and verbal integrity of the marginal, who do not speak Castilian Spanish and use language as play.

As to field data, I provide many accounts that include me. Sometimes, though, I provide ones where study participants recollected previous events. On their face, they may appear purely autobiographical or not validated. However, since I grew up with most of the guys, I was "there" for many of those events: I observed them from their teenage years, to their drug-dealing years, to their brutal years as drug robbers. I provide their words so that readers can hear their voices and grasp their meanings.

That said, sometimes I was not "there." For instance, when they took drug-dealing trips to other states, I did not accompany them, but only heard their stories upon return. However, I always validated those accounts through speaking with others that witnessed the same events.

I ordered the material chronologically, though I am purposely vague about exact dates and years. Disclosing time-related information could be dangerous to the study participants. And I promised them that the research would not lead to their arrests or to drug dealer retaliation.

In all, I interviewed, spoke with, or observed twenty-seven people in and around the South Bronx neighborhood. I have used pseudonyms to protect them all. I disclose the field site and give some character descriptions. That, I hope, is enough.

As to robberies, I was mostly unaware of a robbery's exact day and time. There were just too many in the works. I would often learn of them when unfamiliar guys came to the block and pulled study participants aside. Sometimes, they returned from these sidewalk meetings and continued robbery preparations in my presence. Mostly, I stood silent, never asking about their plans. I commented only when someone asked for my opinion. Like a sounding board, my responses were in the form of, *Yeah, you're right, bro*, no matter what was asked.

For instance, one afternoon, Gus, Neno, and I were hanging out on the public stairwell as they smoked weed. While we were standing there, two middle-aged Dominican men pulled up in a car, got out, and walked to a sidewalk space about ten yards away. Gus and Neno met them with partial hugs. Neno then offered one of the men a hit of the weed. Smiling, the guy accepted and inhaled deeply. For about the next five minutes, they spoke furtively. I heard nothing, only observing nodding heads, moving lips, and puffs of smoke. After the men left, Gus and Neno returned to our spot and discussed an upcoming robbery.

"It's like I told them," Gus said, in Spanish, "if we use the girl, she can get us in the apartment without a problem. Without a problem. How many times did we use her? Tell me, how many times did we get inside the apartments?"

"No, I know," Neno responded.

"Then he's [the man he just spoke with] saying that it's not going to work," Gus continued, "that if we send the girl to knock on the door, it's not going to work. That guy was just talking shit. He doesn't know what he's talking about. He doesn't know shit."

Neno was silent. Gus then addressed me in English. "Yo, tell me, if we send Melissa to the apartment, aren't those niggas gonna open that door?"

"Yeah, they probably will," I answered.

"Cause these niggas were like, 'Nah, nah, that's not gonna work. They never open their door.' I'm tryin' to tell those niggas that we used Melissa before and that that shit always works, man. We don't got to pull out no guns and shit on those niggas in a [building] hallway. Bro, that shit's just gonna attract mad attention. Tell me, bro, that shit's just gonna make a lot of noise, right?"

"Yeah, that shit's gonna make a lot of noise," I agreed. "You right."

"That's what I'm tryin' to tell them. But those niggas just don't want to listen, man. Like I said, yo, the niggas we goin' after been doin' this shit for

years, bro. For years. Tell me, if they carryin' eight kilos of coke, they been doin' this like for a real long time, right?"

"If they movin' that much, yeah," I responded. "That shit just don't happen overnight."

"You know what I'm sayin'?" Gus continued. "Those niggas are gonna be lookin' to get robbed, right? They gonna be prepared for that shit. Man, the way they want us to do it, man, that shit ain't gonna work, bro. I know it, man. But those niggas just don't want to listen." He pulled out a lighter and relit the weed blunt that had gone out. He and Neno then resumed smoking.

Such moments represented the scope of my participation. I never asked about a robbery being planned. In fact, I told Pablo and Gus not to inform me of upcoming stickups. I only wanted accounts of ones that were done. *Just give me after-the-fact information, bro.* True, I had received a Federal Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health. This protected me from law enforcement wanting to subpoena my field data. But I was unsure if the federal protection extended to me having "heard something" about future crimes.

Yet, one day, I did think aloud about how *that shit would be dope, kid, to see how a stickup started from beginning to end.* I would understand it better, right? Gus, who believed that "experience is the best teacher," tried hard not to disappoint. So he sometimes informed me of upcoming drug hits, and even invited me to tag along. Only through observations, he insisted, would I learn what robberies were all about. As always, I declined, citing moral and ethical obligations.

Nevertheless, Gus would persist. And after several months, I figured out why: I was his opportunity. Not only could his exploits garner possible media attention, but they also might accord him a higher street status. This was why he introduced me to everyone as his "cousin," the journalist. Never as the sociologist. The guys perhaps understood the work of reporters, who sometimes glamorized criminals in news articles and trade books. By calling me one, he was announcing to the world that his brutal acts were worthy—he even had a journalist, or personal biographer, following him around.²¹

In fact, Gus fell in love with earlier drafts of the robbery chapters, sometimes asking me to carry them when he hung out with girlfriends. Since he had given a lot to the research, I complied. Often, he would have his girlfriends read the chapters and get off on their wide-eyed reactions. *That's you? You're crazy!* Other times, he would get lost in his own rereading of the ac-

counts, ignoring his girlfriends and leaving me to make conversation. Yes, Gus wanted a superstardom that transcended these streets. He wanted to be famous, to have everyone know him, worldwide.

That said, I must address some other methodological matters, critical ones that I can no longer hide from, no longer duck and dodge. In truth, I have grown weary of running from what I have perceived from the start to be a politically charged methodological note. This is ironic because while I sometimes feared for my life during my South Bronx research, I feared even more that disclosing my insider view would harm me professionally.

Insider Research: Standpoint Crisis

Most inner-city ethnographies have been done by upper-middle-class and elite-educated researchers. For them, fieldwork is often their first sustained contact both with poor people of color and with exciting and unfamiliar social phenomena—the streets, the sounds, the language, the black and brown bodies. They admit their race and class privileges and discuss how these might have influenced their observations.²² Then they provide wonderful ethnographic insight, mostly for upper-middle-class readers who are just like them but who would never travel to those exotic worlds.

Now me: I came from a poor South Bronx neighborhood. I attended bad public schools. I used a plastic shopping bag as my school backpack. I wore torn, "holy" sneakers as my only shoes. I starved on many dreary afternoons, often having only soda crackers and government cheese to eat. I shivered in freezing *cold* apartments that landlords refused to heat. Struggling Black and Brown people—those were my neighbors and best friends. For me, the exotic "others" were the professional Whites in Manhattan subways and the middle-class Whites teaching in public schools. Later they were the middle-class Whites, Blacks, and Latino/as that I met as a graduate student. I was not privileged in race, place, or class. And as I started writing this ethnography, an uncomfortable feeling welled up inside me. In fact, it made me freeze.

Fear.

I was afraid of the repercussions of this unprivileged position: I was afraid of how critics would say that my insider knowledge of these South Bronx drug robbers had produced a less objective, less insightful ethnography. I was afraid that, unlike privileged ethnographers, who were praised for studying dangerous urban worlds, I would be vilified for revealing violence

in marginal communities. I was afraid that the Black and Latino/a scholarly communities, who wanted no more negative images, would become angry at me for studying violent Dominican men.

Most of all, I was afraid of taking on the dominant White-male, scientific voice, which, for me, is neither neutral nor authentic. I was afraid that I could not be me, that I could not write from my social space, one that cut across social statuses and time: educated, street, Dominican, 1980s to 2000s, criminalized, marginal, and male.

Sandra Harding and Dorothy Smith's call for researchers to use their unique standpoints, or gendered social positions, was useful here.²³ Patricia Hill Collins complicated this idea by showing how standpoints are based on intersections of race, class, and gender.²⁴ As an unprivileged researcher of color, I could appreciate these methodological breakthroughs. Yet my unprivileged position, with its unique epistemology, or ways of knowing what I know, made me feel uneasy. Would I be as entitled as privileged ethnographers to reveal my standpoint? Would I get the same sympathetic nods as privileged ethnographers did when they revealed their positionality within the research?

Given my experiences within the privileged world, I thought not. Reinforcing this gut feeling was the reaction of colleagues when I talked about the focus of my work. *It could ruin your career*, I was told, behind closed doors. *But if I die tomorrow, what I leave behind won't reveal the true workings of a Dominican drug market insider*, I responded, dramatically but sincerely. *Don't do it*, I was told again. *The academic community will judge you. Just knowing that you grew up with these violent men will have them thinking twice about you.*

Afraid, I would listen to these privileged insiders.²⁵ *They're probably right*. I grew silent. I hardly discussed how my background shaped the research; I endlessly sought distractions to avoid writing it up.

Yet no matter which way I ran, I was always dragged right back to this issue. When I discussed my work in public forums, audiences wanted more on my insider status. *This is a fascinating topic*, they would say, *but I want you to discuss more about how your position as an insider affected your research. I also want you to address why you're so different from them, or how it is that you had such a different trajectory*. I would then answer strategically, not revealing entirely how I had felt during the fieldwork. Even the original version of this book manuscript had limited insider discussions. Reviewers criticized this silence—vehemently—and demanded to know more.

So now it has come to the moment I call *standpoint crisis*, where I have to decide whether to fully disclose my background. As a person of color, I have faced many levels of oppression in my everyday world. The risk of adding one more in the academic world—a place where the dominant paradigm is positivistic—makes me hesitate.²⁶ Yet for the sake of being open about the methodology, I will reveal the truth: that my South Bronx experiences during the crack era *did* significantly shape my feelings and interpretations during fieldwork. They also shaped the way I sometimes wrote this ethnography as to language, tone, and style. Here goes.

Desensitization

I grew up in drug-ridden neighborhoods, witnessed violence, and heard lots of talk about violence, so I was partially desensitized toward many violent acts. When study participants recounted torture stories, I simply nodded, chuckled, or smiled. Occasionally, I added a *Damn, that shit is crazy, bro*. Sometimes, I even slapped fives while laughing aloud. For instance, one night, Gus and Neno recounted a torture incident to Pablo, Tukee, and me as we drank liquor on the public stairwell.

We kept fuckin' him up real bad, bro, Gus explained, *and the nigga didn't want to talk, yo. Like we was doin' all type of shit to him, bro. I was punchin' that nigga and shit. These dudes was chokin' him, pistol-whippin' . . . all that shit, bro. Fuckin' him up real bad. Real bad. Then this nigga got the iron and forget it, bro, ha-ha-ha!* [To Neno in Spanish] *Tell them what you did.*

I took out the iron and heated it, Neno explained, in Spanish, *and told him, 'I'm gonna burn your ass, ball-sucker! Tell me where it's [the drugs] at! I'm gonna stain your ass if you don't tell me!' Forget it, when the guy saw the iron, and that it was hot, all of sudden he remembered everything.*

Now the motherfucka remembered he was a fuckin' drug kingpin, B! Tukee added, laughing. *The shit just came to him, B.*

Yeah, I added, *now he's like, 'Oh shit, that's right, I'm a dealer movin' pounds of coke. I just ain't recall that shit a minute ago. Ha-ha!*

Sorry for puttin' you through all that trouble, continued Pablo, acting like the dealer. *You can put the iron away now—ha-ha!—that shit won't be necessary.*

And as Gus finished the story, we continued joking and laughing—including me. During these moments, I was more enthralled than bothered by

their brutality. Rarely did I think about the victim, who had been brutally beaten, maimed, and burned. In fact, I saw those atrocities as coming with the drug-dealing turf. Drug dealers knew that this was a business hazard, I reasoned; everybody knew that at some point they would have their day. It was all part of the "game."

Afterward, I would go home and write up the stories or transcribe the tape-recorded interviews. I would then read the accounts on paper, line by line, word for word . . .

Shocked. Disturbed. Those were the words that described my reaction to their drug robbery violence. On the streets, the magnitude of their violence was hardly apparent to me. Also, I had justified their violence by blaming the dealing victim. I was embarrassed, disappointed. I would never have blamed the victim of race and gender persecution—even within the drug market. In fact, the stories that disturbed me most dealt with gender and racial injustices and stereotypes. This was why they hardly mentioned such accounts around me. If they did, it was because they thought that their comments were "safe." Overall, they understood that any sexist or racist remarks would have me logically tear them apart. But in the realm of drug robberies, I was just like them. I blamed the dealer.

Then it hit me: after hanging out with these men so much, I momentarily went back to my old status and role as "wannabe" drug dealer. On the streets, the cold capitalist rationalizations had returned, those justifications for making money no matter the human costs. Beating, burnings, mutilation—*Man, you gotta do what you gotta do to get that loot*. Sometimes, I even felt that certain magic moment again, that time during late 1980s when I believed that the drug market was my only way to financial success. This was when I saw the world as my study participants did, when I felt their lofty desires and emotional pain. I was damn tired of being penniless, broke. I was desperate to earn tons of money and prestige. Drug robberies were the only way out of poverty, out of misery, out of the damn South Bronx . . . Drugs, guns, and violence—*Fuck it*. Just put me down. I'm ready to go.

I was "one of them" again.

On the streets, I romanticized them—I saw them as street heroes jumping over social hurdles and obstacles. But when I read their isolated accounts afterward, alone, the stories *leaped* at me from the page. Then, I interpreted them from the other extreme: stone cold sociopaths. This is when I thought that there was something mentally wrong with them, when I thought that they were hopeless and irredeemable. Without a social context,

their words and actions made it hard to see them any other way. *These people are my friends?* I often asked myself, in disbelief.

But then I would remember the time when I would have done anything to make "crazy" money. So I put myself in their shoes: *If I were in their social position today, and had invested my prime years in the drug market, and had a criminal record, and had no legal options for economic success, would I join them on robberies? Would I be capable of the violence that they do? Which one would it be: would I be utterly shocked and disgusted at the brutality, or would I understand it as instrumental to getting the drugs and cash?*

A long pause . . .

The long pause in my reply, though, would disturb me, making me answer a definitive *No!* But that long pause occurred for a reason. I knew that I currently answered from a different social space. In the past, I was like them: I was poorly educated, a child of Dominican immigrants, and spent my childhood and teenage years in burning South Bronx neighborhoods. I had also seen little prospect in schooling and legal work, which had led me into drug dealing. But now I was close to getting a doctorate in sociology. Now I saw my life chances differently.

What had led to this difference, though, was ironic: unlike them, I had failed miserably in the illegal drug market. Had I experienced drug market success and then gone to prison (every drug dealer I have ever known, except for one, has been jailed or imprisoned), there was a good chance that I would have joined them on drug robberies. Most neighborhood drug market participants with criminal records had done robberies, or desperately wanted to do one. Why would I have been so different?

It was those thoughts and questions that would get my sociological thinking to kick in. I would then search for meanings and patterns on the current page, then for their links to the pages from days, weeks, and months before. Throughout this process, I turned to the sociological and criminological literature. I wanted to find links between my observations and other scholarly theories and empirical findings. Soon, I saw that there was logic and reason to these men's violence. At the micro-level, I saw how their in-the-moment violence was shaped by the emotional processes associated with drug robbery. At higher levels, I saw how their violent robberies grew out of larger cultural and material goals, deteriorating economic and community conditions, and especially—especially—the shrinking of the crack market. The challenge was weaving these different levels of analysis into one consistent descriptive and analytical pattern. With this book, I hope to have met that challenge.

Keeping It Real: Challenges to Insider Status

There was more, however, to being an insider than past experiences. My in-the-moment appearance, words, and behavior counted too. Let me explain. When I started attending graduate school, I found the academic environment new and strange, and its people equally new and strange. My new classmates had different world experiences and most came from privileged spaces. So I often gravitated back to the familiar—to my South Bronx neighborhood and its people.

And the neighborhood guys still saw me as one of them. They never forgot how I had walked the same streets, joked and talked on the same corners, and experienced their high-fiving joy or *fuckin' heated* anger. In other words, they still expected the same ol' Ran, the same dude who had lived and felt just like them, who felt at ease in the company of drug dealers, who knew what to say and do: the grin, the fistful handshake, the *What-up?* the *Chillin'?* the *A'ight*. So despite being a graduate student who was busy learning both the sociological way and the way through an upper-middle-class milieu, I was expected to continue the neighborhood groove.

For instance, one afternoon as I walked with Pablo down a street, I stumbled over a sidewalk crack. Quickly, I recuperated my balance, showing, I thought, serious athleticism and cool. *Yo, you losin' it, Ran*, Pablo still joked, shaking his head. Another time, I arrived to the block clean-shaven and wearing blue jeans, running sneakers, and a baseball jersey, Yankee blue. *Yo, you look like a fuckin' cop*, Pablo remarked, laughing. *Yeah*, Tukee agreed, *you look like one those Hispanic DTs [detectives], those motherfuckas*. Though I laughed along in both cases, the comments stung. In a grander sense, they were sanctions: I was not supposed to stumble, in words, acts, or dress. I was an insider, one of them.

Even Gus hinted at his expectations of my insider status. One summer afternoon, I played dominoes with some guys in the public park. After several games, I asked a guy to take my place, offering my milk-crate seat. As I drank a Corona, Gus—who was always watching—walked over to me. *Yo, don't give your seat up to him*, he said, annoyed. *He's a fuckin' cokehead, man*. I was stung again. True, this was a pedagogical moment, one where he described the neighborhood pecking order. But his tone was sharp. I had done a serious wrong.

On these streets, then, my slip-ups were unacceptable. In other words, I could not act naïve. For other researchers, outsider naïveté is often a wonder-

ful ethnographic tool.²⁷ Whether real or contrived, it often forces participants to teach researchers the do's and don'ts of the field site. However, the prevailing attitude toward me was: *Don't act like you don't know*. So I received no sympathy, no empathy—just a researcher-participant relationship full of no's. No hand-holding. No learning the ropes. No protection from sponsors. No acting like a dope.

Nonetheless, to gather rich data, I would pretend that I “didn't know” and ask a multitude of questions—sometimes to the point where they appeared annoyed. *It's that. I need this information in your own words*, I explained when I saw their exasperation. *This research is more about how you make sense of everything, not just about how I make sense of what's goin' on*. Eventually, they became accustomed to my avalanche of questions and enjoyed being the “experts” in the research.

Being an insider also meant that I had some protection. Gus, the most violent robber, vouched for me as his “cousin,” and Pablo and Tukee called me their “cousin” too. So guys like Topi, Neno, and David, whom I had just met, would never rob or pull a gun on me. But I also knew that with acceptance came adherence to group norms. The guys always enjoyed a good fistfight and believed that men should physically establish their social status, or manhood. My protection, then, was limited to them stopping anyone from potentially killing me. That's it. Anything beneath that point, I was on my own.

For instance, one autumn afternoon, I discussed with Gus and Pablo an interesting but troubling observation. I had noticed that whenever David, Neno, or Topi accompanied me to the *bodega* to buy beer, they stared at my money as I pulled it out of my pocket . . . stared at it as I silently counted it . . . stared at it as I handed it to the grocer . . . and stared at it as I put it away as change. Every time.

“Don't worry about those niggas, bro,” Gus said, laughing. “They ain't gonna do nothin' to you. I already told them you was my cousin. Those niggas won't dare do shit to you, bro. Trust me on that, ha-ha.”

“Those are some funny niggas, ha-ha,” Pablo added. “They be staring at your money and shit. Just fuck those niggas up, bro. They try some shit, just fuck them up. They ain't shit, man. Psst. Those niggas is ass, man.”

“I mean, I ain't worried about them,” I said, showing bravado. “It's just that it always happens, bro. Every time they in the store with me, they always starin' at my money. Like I take it out of my pocket and I go like this [I circled my hand with imaginary money], they be goin' like this [I circled my head as though it was following the circling money hand].”

"Those niggas are like dogs and shit, ha-ha-ha," Gus said, bursting into laughter. "You ever had some food in your hand, bro, and you start goin' like this to a dog [circling his hand], they start movin' their heads like... they start followin' your hand and shit, ha-ha-ha! Those niggas is funny... Like I said, man, they ain't shit. Those niggas is real pussy, bro. You could handle them niggas, bro."

"Just fuck 'em up, Ran," Pablo repeated. "They're bullshit, bro. They ain't shit."

"I'm not worried about them, bro," I said again. "It's just something I noticed, bro, that they always lookin' at my money. I know they not gonna do nothin' to me, like personally, bro. I know they won't do that. But they could send somebody to rob me, bro. They don't have to do it [themselves]. They could send somebody to do it, you understand? They lookin' at my money too much, man. They look like they want it re-e-a-a-l bad, ha-ha."

"Nah, man, don't worry about it, man," Gus said, reassuring me. "Yo, on the strength that I told them that you was my cousin, they won't try that shit, bro. They won't. Trust me, man, they ain't gonna send nobody to rob you. They crazy if they do that shit. They know how I am, bro."

Like Gus said, everyone knew he had my back. In fact, I sometimes sensed that Topi, Neno, and David deferred to me because of him. They never raised their voice at me. Never put me down. They always smiled and said, "*Y que?*" whenever I came around. Initially, I thought it was because I always played it *cool*. When I drank liquor with them, I never dominated conversations; I just listened, nodded, and took slow sips. In fact, we mostly got into in-depth conversations when we were alone. Even then, I was intent on getting their story, their side. Now, though, I see how Gus' violence probably loomed large in the backdrop—a mighty force field of protection that shielded me from a fight.

Insider Biography

I admit that I had preconceived ideas when I first started the research. Given my previous drug-dealing experiences, I was inclined to a Mertonian analysis of drug robbers. As a youth, I had grown up desperately wanting what society said I should want: lots of money. Big houses. Luxury cars. Designer clothes. Respect and status through showing off material goods. I was not alone. Most of the neighborhood youth who later became drug dealers had

wanted the same. On the street corner, conversations that revolved around *if I had the money* had taken much of our time.²⁸

And as a teenager, I was rather pragmatic about how I could reach these material goals. The neighborhood reality was that most adults had legal jobs, yet struggled to make ends meet. Even those who left after purchasing homes lived in unexceptional houses and suburbs. Their new neighborhoods had blight and their homes were cramped and small (their previous South Bronx apartments were actually bigger). They were also overwhelmed with mortgage payments and unforeseen household bills. To me, they had not "made it"; economically, they were still close to their former South Bronx home.²⁹

Also, at an early age, I was an indoctrinated American, infused with the capitalist spirit. Thus, I wanted to join the ranks of the financially successful. I thought nothing of improving the social conditions of the poor. Instead, I searched for that catapult to fling me over the social fortresses surrounding the rich. In the vernacular of the time, I wanted to dress fly, make crazy money, and drive fresh cars. But I also dreamed of achieving that other lifestyle, where, like the people shown in the Nautica ads plastered on building facades and subway walls, I sailed yachts and wore preppy clothes. I wanted badly to be Captain Elite.

But, again, from what I had observed, school was not the move for folks like me. The only people that I had seen rise from the South Bronx ashes were a handful of Dominican and Puerto Rican drug dealers. They were young men of color who eventually made more money than their social conditions should have allowed. With intelligence, drive, ambition, and luck (crack cocaine emerged just on time), they had paved a new economic path. Since they earned more money than the neighborhood adults working legal jobs, they won my admiration, hands down.

Another admission: I had also seen a few of my extended family members strike it rich in the drug market. It was an amazing observation. Only a few years before, I had visited these poor cousins in the Dominican Republic. On the island, they lived in decayed housing that lined dirt streets, had no running hot water, and hardly had electricity. Worse, as older teenagers and young adults, they begged me for money and clothes—me, their little twelve-year-old New York City cousin, who started every Spanish utterance with the English street slang prefix, "Yo."

But later, in the U.S., the tables were turned: they had the designer shirts, pants, and shoes; they wore the big gold chains, bracelets, and rings; and they

carried rubber-banded wads of cash. Sometimes, they would pull out a knot of money, unroll several twenties, and hand them to me: *Here, so you can take some girls out.* I was impressed. Clearly, most of my extended family worked legally and never committed crime. But it was these men that stood out. Although unschooled, they had created a different way to booming economic success.

So this was what I had seen: the drug market—an innovative and alternative path—was the way to go. Merton 101. Since this was how I had roughly framed my drug-dealing experiences, it was the preconceived idea that I had brought to the field. To be clear, I was not deliberately testing or advancing Merton's or his successors' theories of anomie. My experiences had just made this theme familiar, even before I had seen its academic form. So whether I wanted to or not, I was thinking in those terms when I started my South Bronx fieldwork. And when I flipped the research switch and asked why these Dominican men had become drug robbers, Merton's anomie was the first lit lighted bulb.

But as I did fieldwork and read literature, I saw that squeezing my data into this preconceived frame was lopping off crucial parts of the theoretical picture. It was like placing the *Mona Lisa* in a small frame, revealing her hair, her eyes, her nose, but not that important part: her smile. I would, I realized, need a larger frame, and I found it in Philippe Bourgois' drug market spin on resistance theory; Jack Katz' emphasis on crime's emotional allure; and later, Randall Collins' micro theory of violence. These theoretical contributions were just as relevant and strong.³⁰

The Triple Representational Dilemma

I must admit to one other reason for being absent in an earlier manuscript draft. Clearly, I believed in *reflexivity*, where a field researcher explains how his or her social position affected the research.³¹ Weaving themselves into the analysis, they show how they saw what they saw and how they dealt with their race, class, and gender position.³² Still, I balked at putting myself alongside South Bronx drug robbers. I wanted no one—*no one*—calling me a cowboy ethnographer.

The cowboy ethnographer. I use this term to describe ethnographers who are *perceived* to exploit research for their own professional or narcissistic end. In other words, researchers who are thought to glorify themselves at the expense of the study participants.³³ Surely, no one knows whether this is

true of any ethnographer. But behind closed academic doors, the word is that this happens, and the cowboy is ridiculed and scorned. So the perception, not the reality (as the Thomas theorem states), makes the cowboy real.

Mainly, the charge is aimed at researchers studying dangerous or hidden populations. For most laypeople (and academics), these exotic others are distant, only seen roaming the streets or as images on the nightly news. Through ethnographies, though, middle-class readers can live vicariously through a researcher, one with a background similar to their own. Now they get a sense of how they would feel among the homeless or among the urban poor. Now they get a sense of how they would react around violent men, women, or outlaws on the down low. Now they were *there*.

The word is that some ethnographers capitalize on those middle-class curiosities. They project themselves as bravely risking life and limb, as tight-ropeing dangerous race and class lines—and making it back to tell the tale. Whether such cowboy ethnographers truly exist, I do not know. Neither do I care. As long as ethnographers advance knowledge within certain moral and methodological limits, they can do as they wish.

That said, I wanted no part of that label.

As a result, I retreated further, limiting my reflexivity until it was almost gone. If I did include my thoughts and feelings, it was when I was touched by suffering study participants. Those moments were not prone to sensationalism; their pain would remain front and center. Still, in discussing or depicting violence, I not only risked glamorizing the study participants, but myself too. This was the start of the *triple-representational dilemma*.

The first representational dilemma: if I discussed drug robbery torture in depth, then I could be accused of glorifying the study participants' violence. Yet if I played down drug robbery violence, then I could be accused of sanitizing violent study participants.

The second representational dilemma: if I failed to place myself within the text, I could be accused of not showing how my social position affected my research. Yet if I regularly placed myself within the text, especially during violent moments, I could be accused of cowboy ethnography.

In both cases, I was *damned if I do, damned if I don't*.

But there was one more representational dilemma. As alluded to earlier, I was risking being called out as a minority scholar who willingly reinforced racist imagery for professional gain. In a sense, it was like being called, as Mark Fleisher would say, a pimp, but this time with all of its racial connotations.³⁴ Thus:

The *third representational dilemma*: if I discussed violence among minorities, I could be called an exploiting Uncle Tom. Yet if I failed to discuss violence, which was central to my study, then I would not only fail my intellectual promise, but also my study participants, who, like me, wanted to know what was going on in their lives.

In all, as a minority scholar, I faced this *triple-representational dilemma*.

This is what I did: As to the cowboy label, I could only go through my manuscript and look for spots where the action seemed centered on me. I needed to be reflexive, just like the ethnographers who have taught me most. But I also needed to try to remove myself from the center of analysis—unless my emotions clued me in to what was going on. Most important, I did not want to sanitize the world of these South Bronx drug market participants. The violence, the rage, the despair—all was depicted in relation to larger shifts in the social structure. Last, I did the research with intellectual integrity, which meant, to me, no omissions. I would deal directly with violence among marginal minorities.

In the end, I could not let others dictate my research. I would never politicize the research of others, especially on topics that are deviant, taboo, controversial, or that challenge the sociological mainstream. Also, I was not a cowboy who had ventured into the “unknown.” The world of these South Bronx Dominican men was familiar—their neighborhood was my neighborhood, their past was my past. And I wanted to learn about what had gone on with *our* community, the factors that had shaped *our* lives. As an academic, especially one with close ties to the research, this was my freedom, my right. And if these men had not existed, then there would be no need to research them. But they did. This alone merited their study. As humans, they needed understanding too.

Danger, Writing, and Representation

Throughout the research, I was grateful to the Dominican men (and one woman) who let me observe them, tape-record conversations, and write their stories despite the great risks. For this, I wanted to repay them. It was only fair. But I had no money or big payday in sight. For instance, I had yet to secure a book deal, so I could not promise royalties.³⁵ Even if I did have one, I was almost sure of two scenarios. First, it would be a laughable pittance to men accustomed to earning big money. In fact, given the small earnings of an academic book, they might think that I was secretly pocketing profits.

Coño. This unsettled me. From the capitalist streets, I had learned that *money does funny things to people*. Money could even trump close bonds.

For instance, one winter evening I sat in Pablo’s home, listening to him complain about Geraldo, a drug dealer and restaurant owner. According to Pablo, he had allowed Geraldo to register a car under his name. Geraldo then accumulated twelve hundred dollars in traffic violations. Pablo, who did not want jail time, demanded payback. Geraldo, however, refused to pay. As retribution, Pablo set up Geraldo for a robbery. These men, I should add, are biological brothers. Pablo did not care.

“Yo, Ran,” Pablo said, angrily. “He told me, ‘I don’t give a fuck about you, that’s your problem.’ I mean, he didn’t say that, but that’s the way I take it since he doesn’t pay me. That’s why I already talked to some people to have him bagged [robbed]. He’s lucky, yo. I sent people already to have him bagged, but he’s never alone, bro. Like in the mornin’ when he opens the restaurant, he’s with his wife. I don’t want her to be involved, you know what I’m sayin’? Or his kids either, bro. I don’t want them to go through that trauma. I want him to go through the trauma. But he’s gonna get bagged, yo. Watch, I’m just waitin’.”

A couple of months later, Pablo was still angry at Geraldo.

“Can you believe that shit, Ran?” Pablo asked. “That nigga still hasn’t paid me one dime, bro. Not one fuckin’ penny. Yo, and that shit’s been goin’ on for a over year, bro. Over a fuckin’ year.”

“You think he has the money to pay it, bro?” I asked.

“Yo, he *had* the money. Even if he don’t have it now, the point is that he had it, yo. He could’a gave me my shit, man. I’m tellin’ you, man, nigga’s shy-sty, man. Especially that nigga, man. You don’t know, I just want to fuckin’ [Pablo paused, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly] . . . I can’t wait for that nigga to start makin’ money. To tell you the truth, somebody’s gonna be knockin’ on that nigga’s door. That’s to the point that I’m in. I’m waitin’ to hear that he’s doin’ good, bro.”

“Why don’t you tell him every week to, or every month to—”

“Yeah, I tell him, man!” Pablo said angrily. “Yo, he’s with some bullshit! Always with some bullshit. I’m just dyin’ for that nigga to start makin’ money. Even if I hear that he’s makin’ money in the streets, Randy, I swear on [my] moms, yo, I’m a send niggas [robbers] to his house. For real, man.”

Again, this was his brother from the same mother. What would he do to me if he thought that I had shortchanged him from book profits? This and other stories had me easily imagine disgruntled research participants

gagging and binding me and then threatening me with a steaming hot iron, all for earnings I never had. So whenever we discussed the book, I played down the royalties:

Yo, the thing with academic books, I often told them, is that they don't sell a lot. I mean, I hope this one does. I'm writin' it to give it a chance to sell a lot. But from what I seen, none of them don't.

The second scenario was less threatening, but just as real: I would need that royalty pittance more than they did. I was a poor graduate student and, given starting salaries for sociology professors, I saw myself struggling financially for awhile. Most sociologists, I was learning, did the work not for the money, but for a passion to unravel the social world. No doubt that these intelligent folks could have earned much more as accountants, attorneys, entrepreneurs, medical doctors, and corporate managers. They simply loved the sociological game.

Since I loved the game too, I was not going to be filthy rich anytime soon, if ever. The study participants were always shocked when I reminded them of this aspect of my brilliant career. Their usual response was: *Damn, that's it? You ain't gonna make shit. Then what the fuck you goin' to school for, all those years?* But the point, I hope, was made: they knew that, money-wise, I could offer little.

There was one thing, though, that I could give them. Within certain bounds, I could grant them authority over their representation. And I did. Individually, I talked to them about this authority and then asked them about what they would like from the book. Their response? They wanted me to portray them as slick criminals who outsmarted drug dealers as they took dangerous risks. Wait. They also wanted to be on the big screen, wanting the book to become a film script. *Professional Drug Hits: The Movie.*

At first, I laughed at their cinematic dreams. *Man, you all some funny dudes!* But over time I realized that they took their potential fame seriously. This was their chance to be "somebody," more than vacant faces on languid street corners, or black and brown bodies doing push-ups in scorching prison yards. This was their chance to rise above their criminal obscurity and become stars. *Stars, yo.*

Since they had risked a lot for my research, I wanted to honor that wish. But I had to represent them sociologically as well. It was more important to reveal the social processes that shaped and influenced them than to provide sensational stories of their brutal acts. Also, danger loomed in such representations. Conservative critics could use them to further vilify poor, minority communi-

ties. General readers might never, ever, see the humanity behind the gruesome acts. In all, I risked reinforcing negative stereotypes rather than providing an accurate sociological account. It was a decisional tug-of-war: I wanted to give them a potential movie. But I wanted to realize my sociological goals too.

First, I wrote a narrative that I felt would be appreciated by both study participants and a general audience. Within that story, I cut in occasionally for sociological analysis. I used my natural writing voice, which embodied our background and past. *Ya tu sabe?* it had the cadence that we had inherited from our Dominican culture; it had the words and sounds that we had picked up on the South Bronx streets. It had, in all, a voice that I still sometimes thought in, spoke in.

Still, this voice was not *the academic voice*. Like an iron mask, the academic voice was hard, rigid; it sounded neutral and scientific. I could write in that voice, which graduate school had taught me well. But it was not me. I shared little with its history and practitioners. Using it would also concede that the best expression could never come from people like me. This is simply untrue and unfair. Still, I could get in trouble for avoiding *The Voice*. Academics could charge that I was unprofessional and flippant toward established sociological practices. Worst-case scenario: I would be exiled to sociology's fringes, where I would never be heard from again. *Ay, mi madre.* Using my authentic voice was full of *peligros*.

Que se joda. I took the chance. My study participants had to appreciate and understand the ethnography. So I wrote in my voice, their voice, our voice, a legitimate voice. More important, I kept my word. Despite my academic goals, I wrote a manuscript that could potentially attract many general readers, one of whom could be a screenwriter or movie producer. *Win-win*, I thought, as I submitted some chapters to one university press, and an entire manuscript to both another university press and a trade press. Excited, I waited for the response. Then: bad news. The trade press felt that it had too much analysis. The university presses, the reverse: the story and style overwhelmed its sociological significance.

I was dejected.

I had tried to write an ethnography with both popular appeal and academic breadth. But I had failed. My eager study participants—I did not know what to tell them. Since I had really wanted to publish with a university press, I would now have to cut their stories, change the voice, and use a traditional academic format. Ultimately, I was a scholar, with a responsibility to theoretically and analytically understand their worlds. I then realized

that my study participants never had representational authority. I could overrule them, anytime. I also realized that, no matter my explanation, they could call me a liar, *un embustero*. A phone conversation with Gus made me feel even worse. After catching up, we talked about the book's progress. Then he said: *It feels real good to know that people will be readin' my life story, bro. Like they'll see how it all started, like from the beginning to end . . . That shit'll make a good movie, bro. I know it. That's why I can't wait to read that shit. I'm gonna read all of it, all of it. It's gonna make a good movie, bro. Just watch.*

After a pause, I repeated to Gus that I had to make some manuscript changes before getting it published. But I could not bring myself to tell him that I would also delete most of the story. As of this writing, I have yet to tell them. I can only say: *Sorry Gus, Pablo, and Tukee. I tried my best. I really tried.*

The study participants, to be sure, will not like this final version. For sociological reasons, I had to cut their robbery stories and expand the sociological analysis. Left alone, the disturbing and brutal tales overpowered the academic analysis. I know this from the anonymous reviewers, who gave up their precious time to read the earlier version. So this time I wrote it (as much as possible) in reverse: I weaved the stories around the sociological analysis. I truly hope this works.

That said, I have tried to keep some of the original voice, one that both the study participants and general readers can appreciate. In doing so, I hope to make this ethnography accessible to both audiences. I want these South Bronx Dominicans to understand what a sociologist is saying about them. I want a general audience to understand how a sociologist can uncover hidden social processes in marginal people's lives. This is only fair to the South Bronx men and women willing to share their lives with me. To them, I say:

Gracias, for letting me write it all down.

PART ONE

Becoming Stickup Kids

The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

C. WRIGHT MILLS
Sociological Imagination

The Rise of the South Bronx and Crack

THE BRONX IS A LAND OF STEEP HILLS, green parks, and elegant architecture. The borough is slightly smaller in square mileage than Boston, but with over 1.3 million residents, it has almost two and half times its population. Still, it is only New York City's fourth most populated borough, coming ahead of just Staten Island.¹ The Bronx is also the only borough attached to the mainland; Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island—water separates them all. The land borders Long Island Sound to the east, the East River to the southeast, the Harlem River to the west, and the county of Westchester, a wealthy neighbor, to the north.

The natural landscape is beautiful, with parkland covering nearly a quarter of the borough.² These parks offer shady trees, green grass, athletic fields, and colorful playgrounds, all for pleasant mornings, evenings, and afternoons. On streets outside the parks stand butter-colored art deco buildings, a signature of curves and arches that soften the Bronx sky. These elegant buildings have housed residents from all over the world; in their early years, from Europe, and later, from Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America.³

But a close inspection reveals severity. Sidewalks wrinkle with cracks, roads crater with potholes. Building facades crumble, litter adorns the street. Every bright color is dimmed by soot, a thick coat of gray. Though reviving, the Bronx is still the Bronx. Next to most New York City boroughs, it is crime ridden, poverty ridden, and uneducated.⁴

It is here that the lives of the Dominican drug robbers have unfolded. Not so long ago, the South Bronx was an urban inferno, with thieves, drug pushers, and vandals roaming its abandoned streets. This was not always so. The Bronx was once a glorious city. But some political, economic, and social woes reversed the borough's forward momentum. Then it was the Hopeless

Bronx. The Shameful Bronx. The City on Fire. Under Siege. These Dominican men came of age then, during the time when the South Bronx was falling apart.

More important to their lives was the crack era. This period coincided with the South Bronx demise and influenced them first to become crack dealers, then drug robbers. Thus, they evolved within a social context in which political, global, and social forces transformed the drug market, forces that would later affect other urban areas too.

And I must describe those historical factors in some detail. My own readings of ethnographies suggest that a superficial “background” section—one or two pages—is like a speck of dust, large enough to notice, but small enough to forget after flicking off. This then leads to a limited analysis that dismisses historical and structural factors. For example, in explaining why Black men are overrepresented as robbers, Katz argues that poverty is irrelevant since other poor ethnic groups do fewer robberies. He then links this crime statistic to Black culture, claiming that it glorifies the criminal “hardman.”⁵

I am unsure how Katz discovered this Black cultural trait from just looking at arrest data, police files, or robber autobiographies. Also, “hardmen” can be found in other ethnic cultures, like the *bandido* in Mexican culture or the mafia heist man in the Italian American community. In the end, I wish Katz had considered how history—its social forces and criminal opportunities—matters just as much. Because perhaps African American robbers have less access to crimes controlled by certain ethnic groups. Perhaps the actions of public, business, and political leaders, and a fleeing White (and Black) middle class, drain the community’s economic pond, which in turn creates a concentration of poor African Americans, which in turn increases their risks of doing street crime.⁶

Perhaps it is a combination of all.⁷

I pay attention to these historical and structural matters. Though these Dominican men did not create the South Bronx, it set the stage for their lives. In the South Bronx, their criminal opportunities rose and fell, and the effects of the crack era lingered long after the demand for crack had peaked and declined. The South Bronx was where they first became dealers, then drug robbers, then self-destructive human beings. Thus, these Dominican men were situated in a historical and social context.⁸ Race, class, history, community, and drug market swings all shaped the motion picture of their lives.⁹

THE BRONX

For real, bro? Nah, that’s bullshit, man. I don’t remember the Bronx being like that. This shit was always fucked up, at least far as I could remember. Shit was on fire back then. Fuck, shit’s still on fire now, ha-ha. Nah, I can’t believe that, bro. You must got your facts wrong or somethin’.

PABLO

Like Pablo, I could not believe that our South Bronx was once called the “Wonder Borough.”¹⁰ Yet during the nineteenth century, the area was an Eden, a tranquil, hilly, and leafy wilderness parceled into large estates. It would attract prosperous Manhattan residents who were sold on the idea of country and morality, who wanted to escape the mostly German and Irish slum neighborhoods that were filled with street gangs, drunkards, disease, and crime.

And by the early 1900s, the Bronx had gone from an idyllic country escape to a posh city, full of style. To make a mark, Bronx boosters built impressive, large apartment houses. These apartments, which the study participants and I now called “home,” were designed according to the period’s French art deco movement.¹¹ Resembling French flats, they had all the modern amenities—hot water, separate living and sleeping quarters, electric lights, telephones, steam heat, separate kitchens, and private bathrooms. The grand buildings also featured elevators, large hallways, and marbled lobbies, and sometimes had entrance courtyards with water fountains, statuary, and shrub-filled gardens.

Bronx boosters also lavished funds on one grand public amenity: parks. They wanted a remarkable but tranquil experience in wide-open areas with grass and trees, where people could forget, if for a day, urban life. Like Manhattan’s Central Park, Bronx parks would stimulate modern residential construction, raise property values, and ultimately increase tax revenues. Potentially, the Bronx could rival the grandest cities in the world: London, Paris, Rome. Indeed, the construction of Crotona Park, Claremont Park, Van Cortland Park, and Pelham Bay Park made the borough’s reputation sparkle.¹²

True to plan, by the 1920s, the Bronx was a smash, with modern buildings, large parks, and spectacular public works.¹³

It had the Grand Boulevard and Concourse, a broad, four-mile curving boulevard that was modeled on the Champs-Élysées of Paris and that showcased three roadways, one for pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages, and two for automobiles.

It had Yankee Stadium, which was made famous after "Babe" Ruth, one of the greatest hitters of all time, awed baseball fans with spectacular home runs and led the Yankees to a string of World Championships.

It had the Bronx Zoo and the Bronx Botanical Gardens, which featured exotic animals and plant life, and attracted visitors from all over the world.

It had respectable institutions of higher education, housing the campuses of Fordham and New York Universities, two intellectual sites that attracted the city's brightest.

It had the Concourse Plaza Hotel, a luxury establishment that catered to a high-end clientele, hosted extravagant events, and was home to athletic superstars.

And it had a powerful Democratic presence—led by "You're in like Flynn" Boss Flynn—which played a crucial role in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidential victory.

The Bronx had it all.

The successful borough also attracted a middle class wanting modern living and a working class wanting upgraded housing. In addition, it drew in a mix of immigrants, mostly Americanized German Jews and Irish wanting to escape Manhattan's congestion. Later, oppressed Russian and Eastern European Jews, as well as Italian peasants, would make the Bronx their home. The Bronx became a symbol of accomplishment, a move up on the status ladder.¹⁴

The Bronx Slides Downhill

Then, like a mudslide during a torrential rainfall, the Bronx went downhill after the Second World War. Many White, middle-class residents fled from newly arrived poor Puerto Ricans (who themselves had fled from a sad island economy)¹⁵ and from newly arrived poor Blacks (who themselves had fled from a tyrannical Jim Crow South). Through the G.I. Bill, which sponsored low-interest loans, they settled in suburban homes.

Poverty in the Bronx would also expand because of a one-man social force, Robert Moses.¹⁶ As a public official, he purposely designed bridges and parkways as cages to contain minorities; and he demolished 113 streets, dispersing tens of thousands of Jewish residents in East Tremont, all for a seven-mile stretch of highway to ease travel for outsiders—the Cross Bronx Expressway.¹⁷ He also cleared Manhattan slum neighborhoods for public

housing, which uprooted poor Blacks and Puerto Ricans to South Bronx neighborhoods. The influx of poor residents would allow some Bronx landlords to lower building maintenance, which lowered their expenses while increasing their profit.¹⁸

The Bronx slid further because of the demise of New York City's manufacturing economy. For generations, manufacturing had provided unionized security for European immigrants and their children.¹⁹ However, between 1947 and 1976, New York City lost about five hundred thousand factory jobs, many to non-unionized regions of the country.²⁰

In an intriguing account, sociologist Robert Fitch argues that New York City could have saved hundreds of thousands of those manufacturing jobs.²¹ However, city officials sided with the real estate elites, who wanted to develop more office buildings for higher profits and land values. Specifically, the elite persuaded the city to give Title I status to much of the land where the remaining manufacturing sat. Thus, the plants and factories where hundreds of thousands of people had worked were knocked down for the promise of "urban renewal."

Worse, the city wholeheartedly subsidized office building construction by offering developers serious tax abatements and relief. Banks also granted them mortgages in staggering amounts. But after the towering office buildings went up, the projected white-collar economy never took off. And for the next several decades, vast amounts of office space went unused. The city continued to subsidize the empty spaces despite losing the tax revenue. The banks also lost millions of dollars in unpaid mortgages. The winners were the elite; they played with city and bank money, not their own.

Those who lost the most were blue-collar and low-wage New Yorkers. Hundreds of thousands of them lost traditionally secure jobs, all because their presence was a profit blocker to the powerful.²² And they knew very little about how the city and real estate world had ruined their lives. Instead, they blamed the minority poor, echoing the distortions created by public officials. As a spokesman for New York City's municipal association argued decades later, "It's the fucking blacks and Puerto Ricans. They use too many city services and they don't pay any taxes. New York's in trouble because it's got too many fucking blacks and Puerto Ricans."²³

For Bronx residents, then, the mighty manufacturing industries were no longer the first-generational step toward the realization of the American Dream. And the borough's postwar newcomers, who were mostly minority,

uneducated, and unskilled, would need a higher education to succeed—one that, like the new office buildings, was skyscraper high.

Beware of the Bronx: Las Gangas y los Tecatos

The 1960s was the decade when the South Bronx gained a sinister reputation. The borough's new inhabitants were thought to embrace drugs, welfare, and crime.²⁴ True, Blacks and Puerto Ricans committed most of the borough's violence, and experienced most of its poverty. Critics, though, generally blamed their supposed wayward cultures. The loss of manufacturing jobs, the language barriers, the need for education and training, all were lost in the public's explanation of the Bronx decline.

Worse, during this period Bronx residents witnessed the rise of *los tecatos*.²⁵ Filthy and worn out, *los tecatos* were well known to us as they roamed the streets day and night chasing *manteca*, or a heroin blast. After copping some *manteca*, *los tecatos* sought sanctuary in dark alleys, stairwells, abandoned buildings, or lonely rooftops. They wanted privacy to experience heroin's sudden euphoric flush, which, for some, was more pleasurable than passionate sex, more nourishing than a plateful of *mami's* home-cooked food. *Pura tranquilidad.*

The tranquility, however, was short-lived. Often, the more users used, the more tolerance they gained—and the more *manteca* they needed for the same high. If not, they got "sick," or experienced withdrawal. To support frequent use, *los tecatos* would soon swell the ranks of *joloperos* and *ladrones*, who robbed, burglarized, and mugged residents for that quick dope cash.

Then the gangs began to make their mark on the South Bronx scene. Wearing denim jeans and jackets, thick belts and big boots, all adorned with war regalia and violent emblems, these youths paraded as the new aristocracy of the streets. Like feudal lords, they commanded neighborhoods, setting the rules and meting out the punishments. They claimed to do the good that the police wouldn't do: they beat up *tecatos*, ran drug pushers off the streets, and put up signs that warned, *No Junkies Allowed*. The gangs declared that they were about street justice, about cleaning up the community, about doing what the city had yet to do.²⁶

However, gangs like the Savage Nomads, whom I often saw milling about, fought bloody turf wars with rivals. Worse, many gangs terrified neighborhoods rather than protecting them: they mugged, robbed, and burglarized people, while doing heavy drugs too.

South Bronx residents were in trouble. Now they feared both the *tecatos* and the *gangas* lurking in the shadows, eyeing the scene for that *pendejo* walking down a lonely street. *Cuidate . . . que valla con Dios*, said fearful Bronx residents as they bid a safe farewell in the most literal way.

A cold, misty underworld took over the streets. In 1960, there were close to a thousand reported assaults; in 1969, over four thousand. In the same period, burglaries increased from just under two thousand to over twenty-nine thousand.²⁷ To outsiders, the mere mention of the South Bronx brought the shakes and the shivers, the body moves that showed how it was best not to go there. *Go to the Bronx? You must be crazy.*

Fuego in the Bronx

Yeah, I remember that shit. People just used to put shit on fire back then, B. Fuckin' landlords be like, "Don't wanna pay no more taxes, B." Ha-ha. "Twenty families still in there? Fuck it, they gonna [burn] too, B." Ha-ha. "Time to put you out your misery. Go get Fulano, the fuckin' pyromaniac motherfucka. He's gonna get shit started now." Ha-ha.

TUKEE

Then it got hot. Real hot. The South Bronx was on fire. With the start of rent control laws, many landlords lost money as building maintenance costs rose. Historian Evelyn Gonzalez notes that landlords also lost money because many South Bronx apartments lay empty.²⁸ Residents that could secure enough resources moved to better neighborhoods, but often had no one replacing them. Landlords lost profits fast.

To keep profits up, landlords simply stopped maintaining their properties. Then buildings crumbled. Then tenants complained: no heat, no hot water, garbage and rats everywhere. *Slumlords*. Hearing the cries of poor tenants and community activists, lawmakers tried to strong-arm landlords: they passed legislation that penalized neglectful owners; they empowered tenants to withhold rents in buildings with code violations.

Landlords fumed, disinvesting in their properties altogether. Buildings then broke down faster. Residents and neighborhood merchants packed up and left. Eventually entire city blocks of crumbling buildings were uninhabited. Only imaginative kids and desperate junkies used the empty space. They created playgrounds and clubhouses, drug dens and homes.

Yet landlords were left with the idle structures, which lost value and cash flow—a capitalist no-no. Then it hit them. They realized that their properties were “worth more dead than alive.”²⁹ It was better to burn them, claim them, and collect money from them than to keep them profitless.

Insurance brokers were also in on the scam. In a complicated scheme, they insured buildings up to twenty times their real values and then resold the insurance on the market. Property owners then hired “torches,” who set the buildings ablaze. Afterward, owners collected on insurance claims, with brokers getting a nice cut too.

This fraud was so smooth and so slick that buyers began purchasing abandoned and run-down properties to burn for profit. Derelict buildings bought for a couple of thousand dollars could sometimes be insured for a couple of hundred grand. The South Bronx buildings flamed in a hurry.

It wasn't a victimless crime, however:

Fuego! Fuego! cried South Bronx tenants as they fled buildings just set on fire.

Llamen lo' bombero! cried their neighbors as they called for firefighters to put out the blaze.

In awe and horror, South Bronx residents crowded on sidewalks to witness the fiery spectacle: blaring fire trucks racing to the scene; firefighters hurriedly attaching the cobra of a water hose to the fire hydrant; the *bomb-eros*; with a thick lash of water, trying to tame the feral red and orange flames; the burned-out residents staring quietly at their smoldering homes, hoping that something was left among the ashes. *Bendito.*

But some residents joined in on the arson. To slide up the new public housing waiting list, desperate tenants set fire to their apartments.³⁰ Sometimes they warned other residents in advance and called the fire department as soon as they were safely on the sidewalk. Still, the fire sometimes spread and burned out other tenants too. The South Bronx had gone up in smoke on every end.

Throughout the 1970s, South Bronx residents would experience blazing scenes about twelve thousand times a year.³¹ After awhile, the sound of sirens, the smell of smoke, the sight of smoldering buildings—the whole bombed-out scene—were familiar to the community. (When I was a child, my own family was almost burned out of two apartments; the smoky odor, brown and red rubble, and stretches of grayish, abandoned buildings became ordinary to me. So, till this day, whenever I breathe in the fumes of

burning wood or visit decrepit, deserted inner cities, nostalgia stirs up fond childhood memories of “home.”)

The nation at large, however, got its first glimpse of the burned-out Bronx during the Yankee-Dodger 1977 World Series. During Game Two, a night game, an ABC camera helicopter hovering above Yankee Stadium captured the image of an abandoned elementary school in flames. “There it is, ladies and gentlemen,” commented sports broadcaster Howard Cosell, “the Bronx is burning.”³² President Carter had visited a week earlier to observe the ruins. By now the South Bronx looked like it had been bombed out in a war-time air raid. Within a week, the South Bronx became known as the most awful place on earth.

It helped the Bronx little that New York City collapsed during the 1970s.³³ For over a decade, the city had spent more money than it had coming in. This equation produced a growing budget deficit, with no letup in sight. Worried investors pulled their money, fearing a city bankruptcy. The city, which relied heavily on bond sales and banks, was in a trouble.³⁴ Gotham would act swiftly. The little people, though, paid the price: thirty-eight thousand city workers laid off. Free tuition at public colleges, no longer free.

Turmoil ensued. Police officers picketed City Hall, stopping traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge and cussing out nonprotesting brothers-in-blue. Sanitation workers went on strike, allowing rotting garbage to pile up and litter the streets. Desperate residents took over fire houses, forcing the city to keep them open, to help douse the insurance-fraud flames. The city was angry, out of control.

Like the crumbling, graffiti-scribbled walls that marked the city, Gotham was a mess—it was fear, crime, frustration, abandonment, fire, poverty, chaos, financial loss . . . and the South Bronx would continue to suffer.

Resilience in the Bronx

Not that all was doom and gloom in the South Bronx. It had its own cultural innovation: hip-hop.³⁵ As in disco, hip-hop DJs used two turntables to eliminate pauses between records, which kept the schoolyard and block party crowds dancing. However, they purposely scratched and mixed records to create new rhythms and beats. Also, they now spoke over the music, shouting out short, rhyming phrases that moved the crowd: *Put your hands up in the air, and wave them like you just don't care . . . Somebody scr-e-e-e-a-a-m!*

Over time, DJs and then rap groups rhymed in longer sequences, in self-congratulatory oratories or in vivid accounts of ghetto life.

Electric boogie and break dancing also made the South Bronx scene. Popular among the younger generation, these movements were performed to underground dance and hip-hop music. On crude cardboard slats, or even straight concrete and wood floors, break dancers creatively spun and twisted their bodies in a whiz of motions. The boogiers pretended to run electricity through their bodies, either in snaky waves or choppy staccato. Sometimes they seemed to move as if by magic; they seemed to glide and float on air.

The older generation of South Bronx residents, mainly Puerto Ricans, stuck to older cultural forms, like salsa. Amateur musicians set up in parks or on sidewalks and played conga drums, tambourines, cowbells, and *guitas*. Crowds gathered to listen and dance to the music, retaining a cultural tradition from a warm Caribbean island far away. For a balmy afternoon or a dazzling sunset, the congas beat out the rhythm of the South Bronx Latino soul:

Poom, Poom, Poom . . . Pum-Poom

Poom, Poom, Poom . . . Pum-Poom

Que viva Boriquen!

The South Bronx was alive.³⁶

On the political side, South Bronx neighborhoods started to organize.³⁷ Led by several church coalitions (mostly Catholic), residents learned to mobilize and force public officials into action. Often, they used the famed Alinsky method from Chicago. First, they agitated about easy, winnable issues, like putting up a stop sign or demolishing an abandoned building. Then, with rising momentum, they tackled more imposing ones, like demanding city-subsidized housing or cracking down on landlord insurance fraud.

It started to work.³⁸ In small steps, Bronx neighborhood organizations picketed business institutions and government agencies. They took on the banks, protesting about how despite receiving the bulk of their money from neighborhood depositors, they rarely lent to them. They took on insurance

companies, decrying how they refused to provide affordable insurance to South Bronx property owners, who would rather abandon properties than pay high premiums. They took on city agencies, which had monies to immediately rehabilitate buildings, yet took their sweet time. Often, South Bronx organizations won these tough battles. Sometimes they even formed working relationships with the targeted institution. The South Bronx was finally unclasping its hands and starting to applaud.

However, as the Bronx entered the 1980s, it would struggle. The once powerful Bronx Democratic machine had become weak and corrupt. The Reagan administration drastically cut social services. Worker unions crumbled. Traditional manufacturing work continued its slide. If the South Bronx was dealt a deadly blow now, it could only absorb it, drop to its knees, and gasp.

Along came crack, the new contender for the heavyweight championship of the drug world.

THE RISE OF CRACK

While poor South Bronx residents were weathering arson and abandonment, better off New Yorkers were snorting cocaine. The powder was all the rage at extravagant seventies parties; nightclub lavatories (a popular snorting spot) became as crowded as dance floors. For users, cocaine provided a powerful combination of stamina and euphoria, the catalysts for unending parties and unfettered sex. It was the caviar of drugs, the drug of choice for the well-to-do, for the doctors, lawyers, and other professionals with the capacity and audacity to snort it through thinly rolled hundred-dollar bills.

This decadent period would, in part, turn out to be the background for the drug-related crimes later committed by the Dominican men I write about. Cocaine would birth the drug dubbed "crack," which would first launch them into superstardom and then drop them as fallen stars. But like all social phenomena, crack and cocaine did not appear or vanish by magic. Social forces birthed and nurtured them, then dug their graves.

We must go global—deep into the jungles of South America, right into the belly of Colombia's economic and political beast. Then to the United States' raging upper-middle-class drug culture and its "tough," politically conservative men. Then a return to an emboldened Colombia; then a stop in the balmy Caribbean; and then back to regressive drug policies in the U.S. Back and

forth we must go to understand what shaped the South Bronx drug market and eventually these Dominican men.³⁹

Colombia's Cocaine Economy

In the late nineteenth century, cocaine appeared in the United States as a tonic for health and personality troubles. Doctors, quacks, and entrepreneurs—including Sigmund Freud—hailed the stimulant, claiming that it granted strength to the weak, voice to the timid, and vitality to the sick.⁴⁰ Soon, popular drinks and medicines featured the drug; it promised to enhance spirits and cure ills.

In the early 1900s, though, the fear of rampant addiction and of the mythical “cocaine-crazed” Black man led to the criminalization of cocaine use outside of medical prescriptions.⁴¹ Even among show biz entertainers, jazz musicians, beatniks, and street hipsters and hustlers, heroin and marijuana would become the drugs of choice.⁴²

In the 1960s, cocaine was back. According to drug researcher James Inciardi, its return occurred for two reasons.⁴³ First, the U.S. government cut the legal production of amphetamines and sedatives, which had gained underground popularity. As a result, many drug consumers turned to cocaine, which had been making silent backstage rounds among rock musicians.⁴⁴ Second, the U.S.-supported Pan American Highway provided the means for transporting cocaine. The Washington-based World Bank financed the mega-highway, which benefited corporations wanting better roads for business. From its southern end, the highway started in Buenos Aires, Argentina, then shot straight west into Chile, where it turned north along the western coast and then cut through the tough terrain of Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia, all the way into Mexico.⁴⁵

For cocaine, the crucial part was in Peru. Before the highway, Peru (and Bolivia, its eastern neighbor) produced coca leaf locally as a stimulant. Its chewers and tea drinkers got a healthy burst of energy and stamina while curbing their appetite too. However, producers faced obstacles in selling to outside markets. Mules were the best transportation through the rugged and dangerous Andes. But with the Pan American Highway, coca sellers began moving huge amounts on newly paved roads. Chile, a long and narrow strip of a country, would be the first major destination.⁴⁶

First, Peruvian and Bolivian farmers cultivated the coca leaves. Second, traffickers processed them into a coca paste, or *pasta*. Third, the traffickers

transported the *pasta* to Chile via the Pan American Highway. Fourth, Chilean refiners turned the *pasta* into a coca base, and then into its powder form, cocaine. Finally, small-time Chilean traffickers shipped the cocaine to the United States.⁴⁷ Simple, smooth, and manageable.

Short-lived. In 1973, General Augusto Pinochet, backed by the CIA, overthrew the existing Chilean government. He detained mom-and-pop drug traffickers, crushing the tiny cocaine industry.⁴⁸ Frightened Chilean traffickers fled north, settling in Colombia, which was suffering from its own woes. Politically, it was coming off decades of civil war, which had normalized violence. Economically, it was undergoing postindustrial pains, with a declining manufacturing industry that had citizens teetering on an economic ledge.

Then it happened. Some enterprising Colombians—the seeds of the infamous cocaine cartels that would later run a hugely lucrative cocaine industry—learned the art of making cocaine from the Chilean outlaws. For impoverished Colombians, it was an economic godsend. According to journalist William Adler, cocaine soon surpassed coffee as the country's leading export. Its vibrant market also provided hundreds of thousands of jobs for “private armies to guard coca plants and the jungle processing laboratories, bankers to facilitate money laundering, lawyers, couriers, builders, accountants, bodyguards, assassins, smugglers, real estate agents, pilots, retailers, even zookeepers: one of the cartel founders maintained some two hundred exotic animals at his seven-thousand-acre ranch.”⁴⁹

Yet it was violent work. The next couple of decades would witness the tragic deaths of countless innocent civilians and the shocking murders of politicians, police officers, and judges.⁵⁰ And many of the slain were, in a cruel joke, artistically mutilated. A relic from the bloody civil war, the “Colombian necktie” became cocaine's symbol of terror: the pulling of a victim's tongue through a slit throat so that it flopped down like a tie, or *corbata*.⁵¹

But still, it was the first time in years that money widely circulated among Colombians. And by the late 1970s, the Western world's rising cocaine demand had revved up the country's economic engine, producing a multi-billion-dollar cocaine industry.

The Irony of U.S. Anti-Marijuana Scares

Meanwhile, back in the United States, cocaine use was getting a lift from misguided U.S. anti-drug strategies. In the 1970s, the country's drug enforcers

zoomed in on marijuana, a drug that scientific studies showed to be relatively harmless in moderation. According to journalist Michael Massing, the new focus was a political charade, meant to appease a rising conservative parent movement.⁵² With no scientific evidence, these organized parents asserted that marijuana was morally corrupting the nation's youth. Predictably, politicians caved in, fearing the parents' uncanny ability to instantly rally en masse. Marijuana—new drug enemy No. 1.

Through a crop-eradication strategy, the U.S. sprayed Mexican marijuana fields with paraquat, a highly toxic weed killer. The technique scared many U.S. marijuana users, who, as a health precaution, stopped smoking the plant's Mexican strain.⁵³ Still, the government had targeted the wrong drug. It was U.S. cocaine use that was on the rise, not marijuana. Displaced marijuana dealers, though, would observe the new trend. With smuggling networks and distributors already in place, cocaine became their new line of business. Now, the planes that once flew bales of marijuana to the U.S. would transport tons of cocaine over the Mexican border into California and over the Caribbean Sea into Florida. Now, the U.S. dealers who once distributed pounds of marijuana would move kilos upon kilos of cocaine.⁵⁴

Sociologist Patricia Adler observed how, in Southern California, "get tough" government interventions pushed upper-level marijuana smugglers into the world of cocaine. As a result, drug profits skyrocketed, and the smugglers' already lavish standard of living rose to even more dizzying heights.⁵⁵ In Brooklyn, too, anthropologist Ansley Hamid observed how U.S. drug enforcement reduced marijuana distribution. But with smuggling networks in place, dealers immediately switched to selling cocaine, a more powerful—and more lucrative—drug.⁵⁶

In all, U.S. anti-marijuana strategies helped to flood the country with cocaine. Cocaine consumption would climb higher and higher, and drug dealers would prosper more than ever.

The Glamour of Cocaine

In U.S. high society, cocaine became a symbol of glamour, like a sparkling ring or exotic fur coat. Costing about a thousand dollars an ounce, it was enjoyed only by the rich, who basked in its euphoria and thought of it as a fine liqueur. (A 1974 *New York Times Magazine* article touted cocaine as the "champagne of drugs."⁵⁷) Another article reported that an "after-sniff of the fine white powder—either from a bejeweled coke spoon held to the nostril

or through a tightly rolled banknote, the higher the denomination the better—is as common as a sniffer of brandy."⁵⁸

Its glow would spur a cocaine surge among affluent U.S. consumers. During the 1970s, cocaine use rose by about 300 percent. To keep up with the ravenous appetite, its overseas producers increased supply by 400 percent. As a result of high demand and high availability, purity would increase by close to 30 percent, and its kilo price would drop by about 60 percent.⁵⁹ Yet it was still too expensive for poor drug consumers. Their turn would come later, through a chemical variation known as "crack."

The Cocaine Era: Dead

The early 1980s witnessed a sharp reversal in attitudes toward cocaine. Healthcare providers started receiving thousands of help calls from addicted cocaine users. Shockingly, most callers were White—upper-middle-class Wall Street executives, doctors, lawyers, and other well-paid professionals, who, of all people, were thought to have their lives under control.⁶⁰ Newspapers featured article titles such as "The Shackles of Cocaine" and "Cocaine: Pleasure Fades Fast, Problems Linger."⁶¹

The most shocking headlines announced the cocaine-related deaths of University of Maryland basketball star Len Bias and *Saturday Night Live* comedian John Belushi. These deaths made the message clear. Cocaine was not a harmless party drug or a marker of high status. Instead, it was anxiety and depression, financial pain and ruin—it was death.

According to Michael Massing, the decline of cocaine would create a two-tier system in drug treatment.⁶² Easily costing three hundred and fifty dollars a day, treatment centers offered affluent users long-term rehabilitation, often in facilities with lush gardens and health spa amenities. Lower income users, however, could not pay for such privilege. Instead, they relied on government-based treatment, which featured short stays and outdated facilities—that is, if applicants could ever reach the top of its long waiting lists.

Widening the treatment gap was the Reagan administration's clear break from a public health model. Christian Parenti documents how, in a show of conservative "toughness," the new White House administration dramatically reduced funds for federal drug treatment while pouring more money into repression: high-tech law enforcement, corrections, drug task forces, and drug user arrests.⁶³ Carlton Turner, Reagan's drug advisor, best captured the White House mood: "If people can afford to go out and buy cocaine, why

should the government pay for their treatment? The government is not responsible for their treatment—*they* are responsible. This country has a problem accepting the fact that there are really bad people in society. We've got the belief that nobody's bad—that we can rehabilitate everybody.”⁶⁴

Ultimately, the zero-tolerance approach paved the way for a major drug epidemic. For Michael Massing, the conservative turn against drug treatment “effectively destroyed the nation’s first line of defense against a new drug outbreak. . . . Then, when the crisis finally hit, the administration—paralyzed by its zero tolerance philosophy—refused to take even the most basic countermeasures. The result was the worst drug epidemic in American history.”⁶⁵ Crack.

The impending crack-cocaine epidemic would harm poor users the most. The government and public were against treating them, only for incarcerating them, even if it meant destroying individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities. As Michael Tonry notes, the effect was an explosion in the number of convictions of minority individuals for nonviolent drug offenses.⁶⁶ The prevailing conservative attitude—based on racist rhetoric and fear mongering⁶⁷—was reshaping already impoverished urban lives.

Crack

Smoking cocaine—not new. During the 1970s, smoking *basuco*, coca paste in cigarettes laced with marijuana or tobacco, was common in South America. And the instant, powerful high outdid the euphoria that came from snorting cocaine. *Basuco* contained harmful chemicals like kerosene and sulfuric acid, which were used to process the coca leaf into paste form. But it was also cheap.⁶⁸ At about fifty cents a cigarette, *basuco* became popular among poor users, especially street youth. In fact, an official Colombian count in 1983 revealed the existence of over six hundred thousand *basuco* users under the age of eighteen—a national crisis.⁶⁹

Even in the United States, some 1970s cocaine aficionados smoked cocaine, or “freebased.”⁷⁰ An ingenious user (whose identity remains unknown) figured out how to *free* the hydrochloric acid from the powder cocaine, purifying it to its *base* form. Hence: *freebase*. Freebasing, though, involved flammable ether, a glass pipe, and a butane torch as lighter. Like comedian Richard Pryor in 1980, a user could go up in flames while performing the act. However, freebase contained no toxic chemicals and provided an instant rush. The downside: the fleeting rush caused smokers to binge for several

days. For instance, in her observations of wealthy White dealers, Patricia Adler notes that “many individuals, once introduced to freebasing, found it increasingly difficult to moderate their drug use. . . . Some heavy users freebased for as long as seven or eight days straight without sleep. One person I knew went through \$20,000 worth of cocaine in a week this way, while another used \$60,000 worth in a month.”⁷¹ The bingeing, then, made freebasing expensive and a practice found mostly among the well-to-do. And by the late seventies, of the estimated four million users of cocaine, about 10 percent freebased only.⁷²

Crack emerged in the Caribbean during the early 1980s. Contributing to its rise was a dual effort by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the Policía Nacional de Colombia (Colombian National Police—CNP) to reduce cocaine trafficking. The DEA learned two vital pieces of information. One: 98 percent of Colombia’s importation of the chemical ether was used to produce cocaine. Two: 90 percent of those importations were coming from Germany and the United States.⁷³ Since ether was used to process coca paste into its powder form, no ether meant no cocaine.

Game on. The DEA and CNP restricted Colombia’s importation of ether. Countering, the Colombian traffickers transported their coca paste to Caribbean islands and to the United States, where ether was available. In the midst of this duel, someone on a West Indian island discovered how to smoke coca paste by adding baking soda, water, and rum. This formulation was called “base rock” or “Roxanne.”⁷⁴ Later, the rum was left out, and the drug became known as “crack,” named for the crackling sound it made when it was smoked.

To make crack, cocaine was heated with baking soda and water until its base was freed from the powder, in a large mound. Users then chipped off tiny pieces of the residue and smoked them, mostly through a glass pipe. As with freebasing, the high was intense and instant, and it left users in an unusually low mood. This after-effect produced bingeing that lasted for hours or days at a time.⁷⁵ The bingeing led to increased demand, and crack use spread quickly throughout the Caribbean, its profits soon surpassing those for cocaine.

Another factor in the rise of crack was the decline of the cocaine market. During the 1970s, the high demand for cocaine led to its overproduction in Latin America.⁷⁶ When users later reduced their intake, a cocaine surplus saturated the market. Caribbean dealers would feel the cocaine glut, the price drop, and the profit loss. Their savior was crack, a drug that, after preparation,

yielded greater quantities than powder cocaine and invited binging.⁷⁷ Earnings could explode.

And they did. In fact, the powerful drug soon made its way through the Caribbean and then into the United States. Almost in chorus, it rose among the Haitians in Miami, the African Americans in Los Angeles, and the Dominicans in New York. Later it spread to other cities, like Baltimore, Chicago, and Detroit.⁷⁸ The crack era was born.

In the coming years, the Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) documented crack's rise. DAWN monitored the country's drug-related emergencies and deaths in hospitals and treatment centers. In 1986, it counted close to 52,000 emergency room visits that "mentioned" cocaine. By 1989, the number had grown to about 110,000.⁷⁹ The demand for crack was on the rise. And someone would meet those needs. That entrepreneur would get filthy rich. *Rich, baby. Rico, papa.*

The Crack Era and Its Riches

The inner-city poor were hungry to fill that economic niche. They were at high risk for unemployment. Unlike preceding generations of immigrants, they didn't have the manufacturing sector as the crucial first step up the economic ladder. The Reagan administration had also cut social services. And the 1980s was the decade of Greed is Good, when Wall Street executives and brokers were earning—fraudulently—staggering amounts of money.⁸⁰ They spent it too. Jets. Yachts. Fast cars. The high life. Everyone saw it.

Since its inception, the U.S., like other capitalist-based nations, reframed greed and gluttony as worthy, as the building blocks of the nation's prosperity and well-being. It was an entrenched "tough luck" ideology that made it noble to contrive ways of making money, even if "losers" were hurt in the process. The quintessential American pursued wealth, *punto*. Regard for the economic, mental, and health consequences of fellow citizens—that was not part of the equation or plan.

The urban poor, born and bred in the U.S., were just as willing to work and spend in their self-interest. And in the 1980s, they used crack as the vehicle for financial and material success. Unlike most businesses, legal or illegal, a crack operation was easy to start: cocaine was cheap, demand was strong, and monopolies were few. Mom-and-pop capitalists could open their doors to business with few obstacles. Crack businesses would hit the city streets, everywhere.

For instance, in Detroit, journalist William Adler traced the rise of the Chambers Brothers, a family-based African American crime organization whose founders had migrated north to escape from poverty in the rural South.⁸¹ After switching from selling marijuana to crack, they struck gold, eventually making about fifty-six million dollars per year. In highlife style, they draped gold on their necks, and draped women on their arms—and even hired a procession of limousines to drive them back to their Alabama hometown. *We rich, Goddammit!* a lieutenant was caught saying on videotape as he shook a laundry basket full of cash.

In New York City, a Dominican crack-selling organization, the Wild Cowboys, also made millions—over sixteen million dollars a year. In separate accounts, sociologist Robert Jackall and journalist Michael Stone note how the crew established crack businesses in parts of Brooklyn, Manhattan, and especially the Bronx. Some selling spots earned them over fifteen thousand a week; others, more than a million dollars per year. But protecting those earnings led to violence—the murder of both rival drug sellers and innocent bystanders caught in their line of fire.⁸²

Not every crack organization was large, violent, or worth millions. Smaller operations made just enough for dealers to live large, in installments. For instance, in Washington Heights (upper Manhattan), Terry Williams documented the lives of the "Cocaine Kids," those cool, slick, lyrical young Dominicans that sold cocaine out of an apartment.⁸³ After they added crack to their business, their staggering profit hurled them into the high life, into bedrooms overflowing with women, into expensive jewelry and clothes—into recognition in the after-hours club, where they mingled with the kings and queens of the drug world. Crack made them "somebody."

The first (brief) newspaper account of Bronx crack came in late 1985.⁸⁴ By mid-1986, journalists were covering it as a serious problem.⁸⁵ As in other U.S. cities, crack had outstripped the Bronx demand for powder cocaine. Bronx dealers soon prepackaged chipped rocks into small and large perfume vials. They used colored tops—Red, Blue, Yellow, Gold, and so forth—to market their brands. They priced crack from three dollars for a tiny vial, to five dollars for a regular one, to ten dollars for a "jumbo." Although most never became "filthy rich," some made lots of money and ascended to the pinnacle of the neighborhood hierarchy. For many youths, they became role models, the guys who were "getting paid."

In my neighborhood, the crack business owners and employees were marginalized urban youths and young adults, and they were everywhere: some

sold on corners, some in building lobbies, some from apartments, and others in the public parks. Crack dealing, unfortunately, became a source of hope, a way out of poverty, a way into manhood, a way to be good at something when everywhere else we failed. Through crack, we saw the American Dream—with all of its material and hedonistic promises—within reach.

Bring It All Together

In sum, no one could have predicted this: that the building of a road through the tropics and mountains of South America would pave the way for cocaine. That cocaine would transform Colombia's gloom into riches, well beyond its deep valleys and rain forests—turning up as fluttering snow on balmy Caribbean islands, then as dewy, luscious raindrops running down the faces of enterprising but poor Black and Brown American men. No one could have predicted that this would partially give rise to not one, but two, drug epidemics—a blessing to some, a scourge to others.

No one would have tied these two epidemics to a rising conservative movement. Our nation's conservatives had stirred up fear, anger, and hate among White Americans, who were unsure of their place on the rungs of unsteady economic and racial ladders. The source of that uncertainty lay in the 1960s civil rights movements, in the open rebellion against injustice led by long-haired liberals, feminists, and people of color. The culmination—the fires, lootings, and shootings—would lock that conservative frame in place.

Yet someone should have known (and perhaps someone did) that this conservative frame would create a space where logic based on fear mongering triumphed, where reason, science, and dialogue were lost to irrationality, where a fear of marijuana use would result in greater cocaine use, where federal funds would push “law and order” to unprecedented heights while reducing critical drug treatment. Someone should have known (and perhaps someone did) that while their conservative words stirred voter fear and outrage, they would also ripen the conditions for a hardcore drug epidemic. Someone should have known—they must have known!—that inner cities and their poor would be ravaged the most.

Because by the time crack arrived in the South Bronx, there was no social barricade to block its entry. By then, the area was still recovering from a social knockout: from the massive White flight that had stripped it of political, social, and economic resources; from the power-hungry, intellectual

monstrosity of a man—Robert Moses—who broke and then reconfigured it to feed his ego; and from the arson and abandonment that hollowed out neighborhoods and created a gigantic, rubble-strewn war zone. Crack just strolled right in.

And crack would wreak havoc in the South Bronx. It produced a world that pitted law-abiding residents against crack dealers and users, a world where neighborhoods suffered from violence while empty crack vials and worn condoms littered its streets. It also produced a world where Bronx families were torn—where crack-abusing loved ones tested the limits of trust and family, and where dilemmas arose as to the practical acceptance or moral rejection of much-needed crack earnings. Bronx communities were taken hostage, but its children were employed.

For the Dominican men that I studied, the deadly combination of South Bronx misery and a crack scourge would shape the rest of their lives. In fact, this combination would eventually lead to their self-destruction, to a state where they would live and die for the drug market's promise, would do anything, no matter how brutal, to keep its dream alive.

Crack was the central turning point of their lives.

Crack Days

GETTING PAID

Every other month, I get a brand new car,
 Got twenty, that's plenty, but I still want more,
 Kind'a fond of Honda scooters—got seventy-four
 I got the riches—to fulfill my needs,
 Got land in the sand of the West Indies
 Even got a little island of my very own,
 I got a frog—a dog with a solid gold bone
 An accountant to account the amount I spent,
 Gotta a treaty with Tahiti 'cause I own a percent
 Got gear, out-wear—for everyday
 Boutiques from France to the U.S.A. . . .
 I got it made

Special Ed "I Got It Made"

THE START OF GUS, 1975—1990

Gus, who was twenty-five years old, was born in the South Bronx. His mother, Regina, had emigrated from the Dominican Republic with her first two children, Sylvio and Maribel. In the D.R., she was a small-time entrepreneur, selling homemade candy and cooked food from a street cart. After her husband died in a car accident, Regina moved to the United States for better work.

When she arrived during the early 1970s, Regina moved in with her sister, into a cramped apartment in the South Bronx. Like other Dominican immigrants, she immediately found employment in a sweatshop and worked long hours for meager pay. Here, she met Gus' father, a philanderer who, after impregnating her, fled the relationship, rarely to be seen or heard from again.

Alone with two children, and one on the way, Regina wanted to avoid deportation. So she arranged a marriage to establish her family's legal resi-

dency. After borrowing four thousand dollars, she married Daniel, an older Puerto Rican man, who disappeared after the business transaction.

Then she met Salazar.

Salazar was a Colombian immigrant who washed dishes in a small Latino restaurant on Jerome Avenue. A short, wide-ribbed, amiable man, he worked long and late hours for a dishwasher's pay. However, on the side, Salazar ran a cocaine operation. During the early 1970s, he was one of the thousands of destitute emigrants that fled Colombia for New York City. And he was one of the few who saw cocaine as a way out of abusive work conditions. So, through a network of Colombian compatriots in Queens, he started selling cocaine in the Bronx.

At first, it was slow going. Salazar only sold to friends in nightclubs and after-hours clubs. The disco era, though, improved his cocaine sales, and he moved the family from their cramped basement apartment on Elliot Place to an art deco-style three-bedroom apartment on 165th Street and Walton Avenue. Then crack cocaine exploded on New York City streets. Drug dealers now purchased more of his cocaine (to cook into crack), and he established his own crack spot. To top it off, he even earned money from competitors, who bought their product from him. So by the mid-1980s, Salazar was the King of Walton Avenue, making the most money out of all the neighborhood drug dealers.

Since childhood, then, the crack industry's high profit and violence were normal for Gus. For as long as he could remember, money, drugs, and guns had been a part of his world.

"They would always be talkin' about drugs in front of me," Gus recalls. "They probably thought that since I was little I ain't know what they were talkin' about. But I knew what they were talkin' about. I mean, I didn't really understand it. Like I knew they was sellin' drugs, but I didn't know everything they were doin'. I would see guns all the time too. They [Salazar and his workers] would like open their jackets, take them off, whatever, and they would have guns like in their waist. What I saw a lot was them always carryin' a lot of money. Sometimes they would like bring that shit to the house and just start countin' it."

As a teenager, I observed such moments when visiting Gus and his older brother, Sylvio. During playtime visits, we often had to close their bedroom door. Yet on bathroom breaks, I sometimes opened the door to see Salazar and others diligently counting a mound of money on the dining room table. Knowing that it was "business," I immediately averted my eyes

and detoured into the bathroom. If I saw this occasionally, Gus must have seen it daily.

Also, Gus saw his older brother, Sylvio, drop out of high school to work with Salazar. Within a year, he had climbed his way up to becoming Salazar's partner, making tens of thousands of dollars per week. Soon neighborhood residents crowded around him, treating him like a local dignitary. Hat in hand, some asked for work in his crack business, and others, all cheers, just wanted his good favor. Gus wanted the same respect too.

"Salazar made a lot of money," Gus recalls, "and I saw how everybody was treatin' him. Even Sylvio, when he started workin' with Salazar, people was lookin' up to him. So imagine, bro, everybody lookin' up to them, and that's my brother and [step] father. I had to do somethin' too. Put it like this, it's like I wanted to prove to everybody that I was a man, that I could do it better than them. That's why I wanted to sell drugs, bro. But I knew that Salazar would be like, 'No,' if I went to him and told him to put me down."

So at the age of thirteen, Gus fell into a teenage drug-selling team that sold three-dollar crack vials. His partners were neighborhood Black youths whose families dealt small amounts of angel dust (PCP) and crack. Unlike their suburban counterparts, with better options for achieving status, Gus and his crew would use crack to earn masculinity and respect.

"I started sellin' crack with Fikki and Buggy, the *morenos* (Blacks) on my block," Gus recalled. "For every vial we sold, we got fifty cents. I was makin' like two hundred, three hundred [dollars] a day. For thirteen, that shit was good, man. We were buyin' all types of clothes and shit. We had money to eat, we was takin' people out to eat, payin' for their shit. That's when we started gettin' all these girls and shit, ha-ha. Imagine, I was only thirteen years old and was already fuckin'! I'm tellin' you, man, money makes a lot of things happen, bro. It definitely gets you a lot of ass at thirteen, ha-ha."

With the drugs came unsanctioned masculine violence. Middle-class teens proved toughness on athletic fields and rinks, and if violent enough, received university scholarships; South Bronx youths with drug market exposure proved their courage in other ways.

For instance, Tikki and Buggy gave Gus two guns, "a .22 [revolver] and a fuckin' old ass .38 [revolver]" for protection. "I used to carry the .38 every day," Gus recalls. "The shit ain't have no fuckin' handle or nothing, ha-ha-ha! We had to put the handle like with a piece of cardboard. We cut it and taped the cardboard to make the handle."

With that junkyard gun Gus caught his first criminal case at the age of fourteen. While attending school sporadically, Gus started talking to Eileen, a classmate. However, she was seeing a member of the Casanova Crew, one of the many New York City crews that emerged during the mid-eighties. Some Casanova guys warned Gus to stay away from her. But he paid no attention.

"So one day I'm out there," Gus recalled, "and this kid comes over and he's like, 'Yo, this dude wants to talk to you over there.' I was like, 'He wanna talk to me? For what?' He was like, 'Nah, he just wanna talk to you.' I was like, fuck it. And I just happened to have that .38 on me that day in school. So we was talkin' and he was like, 'Yo, I told you to stop fuckin' with Eileen.' Then he went to get somethin' in his car, like he turned around. When I seen him like reachin' into his car, I didn't even give him a chance and just shot his ass."

Gus shot him four times: "I shot him once and he fell. And then I ran up to him and shot him again three times." Then Gus ran. However, a couple of plainclothes police officers in a corner pizza shop heard the shots. They went outside, saw Gus running, and took to chase.

"They were right behind me," Gus recalled. "But I didn't know they was cops. So I turned around and shot the last two bullets that I had. I shot those shits. I didn't know they was cops. But the cops try to say that I shot at them."

At the age of fourteen, then, Gus attempted murder. Sadly, such violence was one of the few ways that he, and a growing cadre of marginal youngsters, could demonstrate their toughness. The government, in its own attempts to be conservatively tough, had reduced social safety nets for the poor, which made the neighborhood more vulnerable to drugs and violence. It was no surprise that the *probability* for deadly violence among youths like Gus increased.

The shooting also made Gus a neighborhood legend. From then on, I observed residents fear and respect him. And even fear and respect those close to him—for instance, me. Since I often hung out with Gus, teenagers within a half-mile radius linked me with his violence, greeting me as though we were long lost friends. Clearly, I knew that Gus' enormous shadow granted me this deference. Yet I didn't care. As a marginal teenager, any respect felt good, especially if it was linked to masculinity and violence. Tragically, then, I cheered on Gus' shootings and beatings. It made me "somebody" too.

After his arrest, Gus was detained at the Spofford Juvenile Center, a jail for juveniles awaiting adjudication and sentencing—a warehouse that only worsened marginal youths. Its most important highlight: fights. According to Gus, most fights arose to prove who was tough or punk.

"The kids," Gus recalled, "they all wanted to be gangsters. They used to talk about who was makin' more money on the street, like who was sellin' *more* drugs, all this bullshit. So a lot of fights started because somebody would say that somebody else was talkin' shit . . . or like somebody would hear somebody talkin' about this and that, or they see them actin' like we can't fuck with them. We would be like, 'I'm gonna test him. I'm gonna make him prove it.'"

In time, Gus adapted to the center's violence. For instance, when he sat in a seat, another inmate challenged his spot. Now he did this to others. When he changed the channel on the dormitory television, another inmate challenged his program choice. Now he did this to others. Rather than rehabilitate him, the juvenile facility enhanced his brutality.

After his release from Spofford, and then from Highland Residential Center (a medium-security youth facility), Gus enrolled in Walton High School in the South Bronx. But after a couple of months, he dropped out. At sixteen years old, he just wanted to earn serious money and saw little hope through school. So he asked Salazar and Sylvio for work in their crack business. He was older now, and they gave him a job.

From Monday to Saturday, noon to midnight, Gus managed their crack operation. Sitting in a stash apartment, he distributed crack to street workers and kept a daily record of drug and money transactions. During his tenure there, Pablo and I often visited him. He looked bored and lonely, with the long hours taking their toll. The job left little room for imagination: just counting crack vials, money, and scribbling numbers into a notebook. Eventually, he felt shortchanged, considering all the drudgery and risk involved.

"I was gettin' played," Gus said. "I was only gettin' like six hundred a week or somethin' like that. And I was always there from twelve [P.M.] to twelve [A.M.], bro, almost every day. Sometimes I had to stay later because of some bullshit or something . . . On top of that, if the cops came I would get busted by myself, bro. I was the only person in that apartment. Imagine, if I went down, they would charge me with all those drugs."

Later, Gus became the new cook and bagger, where he worked the same hours and earned the same pay. Throughout the day, he cooked the cocaine into a mound of crack; then, with a razor, he sliced it into tiny pebbles, later stuffing them into perfume vials. After a few weeks of this routine, crack market realities sank in. Although he was family to Salazar and Sylvio, crack, after all, was business. And the point of business was to maximize profit by reducing labor costs as close to zero as possible while squeezing more labor

from workers. Yet Gus found spaces of resistance.¹ Like a legitimate worker fighting against oppressive work conditions, Gus orchestrated a scheme that raised his income by about five hundred dollars per day. As a talented cook, he often produced more crack than usual from the same amount of cocaine. He called this getting "extra."

"When I got nice at cookin'," Gus recalled, "I started gettin' 'extra' back. I would keep that extra. Like it would be a half-ounce extra. So I would bag that up; you know, like for myself and Scotty [a seller in the organization] and I would tell him, 'Yo, here, send these down the hallway, and sell these dimes [ten-dollar vials]. We were sellin' like twenty-five [vials] at a time—twenty-five were ours, twenty-five were Sylvio's, twenty-five were ours, twenty-five were Sylvio's.'"

Competitive, Gus wanted to out-earn Salazar and Sylvio, who together made about fifty thousand dollars a week. So he left the organization to go independent. From then on, he bought his own "coke," cooked his own crack, and viald his own product. He then managed his crack operation outside the Black Gate, a building with a black iron gate at its entrance.

Now Gus made serious money, which allowed him to spend conspicuously. Still sixteen, Gus bought a late-model car, in which he sometimes invited me out for a ride. He drove us around the neighborhood, nonchalantly, rolling to a stop on every corner, dramatically lowering the tinted windows to greet the ride-less corner boys.

Yo, Whatup? he asked.

Yo! they always responded.

Then, pumping up the bass-laden volume, we rolled off to somewhere else, *Let's go here, let's go there . . . Yo, look at that girl, say somethin': Hey baby, you wanna a ride? No? But made you smile, slapping fives, ha-ha-ha . . .* then cruising back to the block, inspecting for smudges, for dirt, admired by the sidewalk crowd, who laughed at his every joke, who agreed with his every line. Then he was back to business—*Yo, I'll be back*—disappearing for one, two, or three hours, then reappearing and inviting some of us to a food joint nearby, sorting the knot of wrinkled dollar bills that paid for the sodas, burgers, and fries.

Then gone again, then back again, talking discreetly (but not too discreetly) to his crack workers nearby.

Then gone again, then back again, adorned in more gold, in fresher clothes, to go with a girlfriend for a movie, and later, for a dinner, and *mucho*

ma' tarde, for a hotel or the stash apartment's bedroom nearby. Money, women, power, respect—Gus, to the young and old of the neighborhood, had it all.

Jason, a neighborhood friend who back then was a low-wage security guard, but was now a cab driver, recalled: "I remember he was makin' money and spendin' money. The nigga had a lot gold. He was almost like Mr. T on the block, ha-ha. He had a car, a brand-new Trans Am with a system and half. He had mad bitches. He had money. That's all I can say, he had money. And the nigga was young, man. The nigga was like only fifteen, sixteen. Whenever we went out, he always flipped [paid] the bill. He used to go out a lot with Sylvio and Salazar, like to a bunch of restaurants, to clubs, all that. Like I said, he was a young nigga too, spendin' more money than grown men."

Later, Pablo joined the crack operation, managing the day shift, from noon to midnight, while Gus managed the night shift, from midnight to noon.²

But because of increased police presence, Gus and Pablo moved their operations to John Mullay Park, two blocks down, on Jerome Avenue. Here, I observed them recruit boys to sell crack while sitting on park benches. This, Gus reasoned, would reduce suspicion.

"Because think about it," Gus explained. "If you see a kid sittin' like on a bench in a park, you not gonna think, 'Oh, they sellin' drugs out here.' They just kids chillin' in the park. But let's say somebody older was to sit on a bench all day, you're gonna think somethin's up. You're gonna think that he's sellin' drugs or somethin'."

One afternoon, Gus took a drive with Sylvio. They were cruising down Gerard Avenue (a block down from Walton Avenue) when a police car ordered them to pull over. While searching Sylvio's vehicle, the police found a handgun under the passenger seat, where Gus was sitting. Both were arrested. Although Gus knew nothing about the gun, he willingly took the charge. He already had two previous cases pending: a robbery and a drug possession.

The robbery charge was from the previous year. As crack use had risen, its committed users had gained a bad reputation. They were often unwashed and emaciated, and thought to be so immoral as to do "anything" for crack. For instance, as a teen, I once witnessed a young street dealer offer a dollar to a crack user if he would do twenty push-ups over a pile of dog dung. As the crack user got close to twenty, the young dealer pressed his foot against his back. The crack user strained and eventually fell upon the droppings. He got up and shamefully received his dollar while everyone laughed. The crack user became an object of ridicule, while his tormentor achieved status.

Similarly, I observed Gus secure status through the brutal humiliation of crack users. "Like when they [crack users] were walkin' by," Gus recalled, "we just like knocked them out. We used to make bets to see who could knock one out with one punch and shit. Sometimes I could do that shit, just knock them out with one punch... Nobody gave a fuck about that shit. A fuckin' crackhead, nobody cared."

For instance, one day, he and a friend attacked a "crackhead" carrying two pillows. Afterward, Gus' friend stabbed the victim and stole the pillows. The next day, the police arrested Gus and charged him with the robbery. Gus took the charge without revealing the stabber, a show of bravado and loyalty that awed everyone.

The drug possession charge resulted from a police stop while he was out on bail. After exiting Salazar's "legitimate" clothing store one day, Gus entered his car, drove around the corner, and was immediately pulled over by undercover police. According to Gus, they placed him in their unmarked car and interrogated him.

"[They] started askin' me all these fuckin' questions about Salazar," Gus recalled. "They were tellin' me a lot of shit like, 'You think we don't know what goes on in there [the store]? We know everything that Salazar does, that you do...,' all that shit. They even started beatin' the shit out of me, right there in the car and shit."

Afterward, the police searched Gus' car. Under the passenger seat, they found an ounce of cocaine. Gus was arrested.

With the new gun charge, the prosecuting attorney gave him a plea deal: if Gus took the gun charge (which came with a one-year sentence), then the robbery and drug possession charges would drop. Gus accepted.

He was sent to Rikers Island, the infamous New York City jail.

HOW PABLO BECAME PABLO, 1971–1990

Pablo, who was twenty-eight-years-old, was born in the South Bronx. His mother, Carmen, had arrived there during the late 1960s and secured work in a belt factory. With her paltry earnings, she supported her two children and mother, who were still in the Dominican Republic. To earn more income, she served and cooked in restaurants too.

Shortly, Carmen met Reuben, a Dominican immigrant working as a painter. After establishing a relationship, they moved into an apartment on

145th Street and St. Anns, sent for Carmen's two children, and then conceived Pablo. Reuben, however, drank heavily and often had late nights with friends (my own father—his best friend—among them). One morning, he arrived home drunk to find that one-year-old Pablo had been playing with a razor and badly cut his foot. He argued with Carmen and, enraged, got into his car and sped away. Later in the afternoon, his car was found in a construction ditch. Reuben was dead. Pablo would often wonder about his own life had his father lived.

"If he was still alive, I think my life would've been different," Pablo confided. "I mean, you never know what could've happened. But maybe I wouldn't have gone through all the shit that I been through. Maybe he could've given me support or somethin', bro. I don't know, man. I just think about that shit sometimes."

After Reuben's death, Carmen secured a job in a restaurant as a full-time cook. She then built up some savings and bought a house in Camden, New Jersey. Unlike their previous home, in the South Bronx, this house was on a hushed residential street.

"It was mad quiet," Pablo recalled. "After six o'clock, not even a car passed by. Everybody was nice and everybody went to church like two times a week. It was like a real safe street."

"Who lived in that neighborhood?" I asked.

"I remember that it was about half and half. White kids and Hispanic and Black kids. I used to play with them a lot. We used to play a lot of tackle football in this park. I had fun, man. I'm tellin' you, I used to live in a real quiet neighborhood. It was real nice, bro."

Though Camden would rank as the nation's most dangerous city within twenty-five years,³ for now it was safe—so safe that Carmen, who still worked in New York City, felt comfortable leaving Pablo and his older sister alone for weeks at a time. Throughout her life, Carmen always worked hard, and she always looked for opportunities to get ahead, investing in small businesses and real estate. But as a single mother with limited English and no access to affordable child care, she was forced to leave her children alone. For Pablo, it resulted in a terror-ridden childhood.

"Living in the house was hell," Pablo recalled. "That bitch [his sister] was crazy. She did all type of shit to me, bro. If she didn't like somethin' I did, she would make me do stupid shit, bro. Like, I had to clean the house by myself. I had to clean the basement by myself. I had to wash clothes by myself—all

type of shit. If I didn't do it, she would get a fuckin' belt or stick or whatever and beat the hell out of me. If I came back dirty from school, I would get an ass-whippin'. I got scars to this day from that bitch, bro."

The expense of maintaining households in New York and New Jersey proved too much for Carmen. After a year, their house went into foreclosure and they moved back to the Bronx. By then, Carmen had received a large lump-sum payout for Reuben's death (she had sued the city successfully for its negligence during street construction). With the money, she purchased a *bodega*, or grocery store, in Manhattan's Washington Heights.⁴ After a year, she sold the store and purchased another one in our neighborhood. "I used to work there like after school and then the weekend," Pablo remembered. "I used to hate it 'cause I was a kid. I wanted to do kid stuff, you know. When you a kid you don't want to go to work. You wanna have fun. I was workin' and I wasn't gettin' paid."

Pablo attended a local high school in the Bronx, several train stops away. The school had a football program and Pablo joined its junior varsity team. He immediately shone: as a middle linebacker, he was a sure tackler, and as a running back, he made everyone one miss. According to Pablo, the head coach in junior varsity told him, "They already talkin' about you in varsity. Everybody sayin' you're gonna be great."

By his junior year, Pablo had made it to varsity, and after the starting middle linebacker got hurt, he played in every game. Soon the game's loud-speaker constantly announced his last name: *Garcia!*⁵

"I wasn't the fastest or the strongest," Pablo recalled, "but I had a heart like a lion. I didn't quit. I hit people hard. In fact, to this day people I don't even remember see me in the street and they're like, 'You're Garcia. You could fuckin' hit. I almost quit football 'cause you hit too fuckin' hard.'" By then, he wanted to start at running back, a position held by a teammate who was heavier, stronger, and faster, but less skilled.

"I just got fed up," Pablo remembered. "I told the offensive coordinator, 'Listen, just give me the rock. Just give it to me! Then coach finally put me in the game. That day I did work. I was breakin' niggas' knees. It was the day that I was like, 'I could do this and nothin' could stop me.'" Within weeks, Pablo was a superstar. "I used to walk down the hall," Pablo recalled, "and, forget it, everybody knew me." His fame strengthened his work ethic. To spend time with him, I often had to visit his school's gym after practice or his home when he was goggy-eyed and sore.

His athletic shine did not extend into the classroom. As long as I had known him, Pablo struggled academically, always putting forth a monumental effort for minimal grades. He was not alone. In outright acts of resistance, other struggling schoolmates repeatedly skipped classes and brazenly hung out by the school's infamous concrete "Wall." If not for football, Pablo might have joined them.

"The coach said," Pablo recalled, "'You're not gonna play with those grades.' So I could never fail classes. Football motivated me to pass my classes so that I could play. I used to see the kids who didn't play sports hang by the wall. They never went to class. Not me, I went to my classes. In fact, I only graduated because I wanted to play football."

In the summer before his senior year, buzz circulated about Pablo making All City and being recruited by a top college program. And Pablo did not disappoint. In his first game, he made sixteen tackles and five sacks (according to Pablo, the latter is still a school record). Now Division I universities showed interest.

"Rutgers was after me like crazy," Pablo remembered. "They weren't that good, but it was a major college, Division I. I also had Michigan callin' me. I had Iowa callin' me. I had a bunch of schools callin' me to let me know that they knew who I was."

However, Pablo would have trouble getting into a Division I school. He had the strength, toughness, quickness, and intelligence to play football. But he lacked the furious speed to play middle linebacker or running back at the top collegiate level. At two hundred pounds, Pablo ran the forty-yard dash in only 4.8 seconds. Top football programs now featured players that weighed twenty more pounds and ran the forty in 4.5 seconds or less. "I remember the coach tellin' me at the time," Pablo recalled, "that if I was just a little faster, I could get into Oklahoma, a Nebraska, or an LSU. But I just didn't have the speed."

What mostly hampered his football prospects, though, was an ankle injury he suffered during a team workout. He would miss the rest of the season after playing only two games. Pablo was down. He thought this was his year to explode.

"I was depressed," Pablo remembered, "because I knew that I was gonna break every fuckin' record out there if it wasn't for fracturing my ankle. I was supposed to do it all that year. I knew I could do it."

Although he eventually returned to the field, Pablo played with a limp for the rest of the season. And since he missed many games, college football

programs lost interest. "Like all the people stopped callin' me and askin' me how I'm doin'," Pablo recalled. "Before I hurt my ankle, they would call a lot just call to say, 'How you doin'? How's everything comin' along?' Then they just stopped callin' me."

Pablo felt that his coach had not helped matters. He knew that organized football was a world where social networks counted just as much as ability. And the coach was Pablo's only broker to the higher ranks in athletics.⁶ With a phone call, and a positive word or two, Pablo felt, the coach could potentially open a space—not a Division I space, but maybe a Division II or III space—for Pablo. And outside the school, no one could provide that social capital.

"Like when the offers stopped comin'," Pablo recalled, "he [the coach] didn't really like help me. I remember the guy from LSU [Louisiana State University] was watchin' a practice and he said somethin' good about me. But my coach didn't say anything to help." Pablo thought about playing football at Nassau Community College on Long Island, which expressed interest. However, he wanted to play at a four-year college, feeling that scouts would pay more attention. So when an African American high school teacher—not his coach—asked him if would be interested in playing at his Down South alma mater, Pablo jumped at the chance.

"[He] was like, 'I've seen you play and you're really good,'" Pablo recalled. "'What do you plan to do? You should play at my alma mater in Georgia. You'll really like it down there and they have a good football team.' He said that he would help me get into the school and get the information for me."

After getting the college application, the teacher helped him complete and mail it off. Then he waited. A few months later, Pablo received a letter of acceptance. He also received a partial football scholarship and was scheduled to be at the summer football camp.

"I felt good," Pablo remembered. "I felt like everything was right there. Like everything was ready. Like I had to go to work. Like I was on a special mission. It was my first time goin' away and I was happy as hell."

So Pablo was proud of going "to work," of having a chance at labor that was valuable, creative, and fulfilling—not the monotonous blue-collar and service work of his family's immigrant generation. Just as important: it was a manly work; thus, unlike Gus, Pablo had little reason to do street violence to prove his manhood. He had the playing field.

However, Pablo also had the misfortune of having attended New York City public schools. Most were in disrepair and overcrowded, and located in

blighted areas with low property values and tax bases. So they could never match the resources of suburban schools.⁷ Worse, they became a place where boys like Pablo were treated not as bright minds and potential leaders, but as inferior students and future criminals.⁸ And Pablo must have sensed this. He had a single-minded focus on football, not school. Yet for football success, he would endure more educational shame and humiliation.

Like many student-athletes, once he got to college, he found that he was academically unprepared to “get by.”⁹ “College was hard,” Pablo remembered. “It was harder than I expected. When I got there, I wasn’t prepared for those classes, man. I had trouble in almost all those classes. I mean, we had tutors, but it was still hard. Most of the time, I just let it go. If I passed a test, I passed. If I didn’t, I didn’t. After a while, I was like, ‘Fuck it.’ As long as I was playin’ ball, fuck it.”

Pablo also felt an economic strain. To survive and pay tuition, Pablo relied on student loans and the government-sponsored Pell grant. However, he had to wait till mid-semester to get any cash. Also, his mother sent him no money even though she had sold her grocery store for profit and established numerous investments in the Dominican Republic. “Financially, I was struggling,” Pablo recalled. “I would ask my mom for money, but she would never send me some. I couldn’t understand that shit. I was trying to do somethin’ positive and she wouldn’t send me any money. I always like needed extra money to buy things like food from the supermarket, like to get a snack or somethin’, or like to just have money in my pocket. I was gettin’ by—just barely, bro.”

With no family support, Pablo depended on the generosity of his teammate and best friend. “I was lucky I had a good teammate. I’ll never forget him, bro. He was this Black dude named Jay. He always looked out for me whenever I needed money, bro. He even took me to his hometown in Georgia and everything. That was a real cool experience. I’ll never forget that shit. I remember when I got to his house, I was like shocked. His family treated me like real family, bro. They made me feel really like at home. He became like my best friend down there, man. I use to stay with him for like holidays, for break, for everything. ‘Cause I couldn’t go home. I ain’t have no money to go home.”

When summer break arrived, Pablo wanted to spend it in the South Bronx. He was tired of staying alone in his dorm and wanted to avoid over-staying his welcome with his friend. So he called Gus to ask if Sylvio could send him transportation funds. Gus then told him not to worry, that he

would send the money instead. Gus gave me the money, which I then wired to Pablo.

A week later, Gus picked up Pablo at the bus terminal. Pablo was stunned. Sixteen-year-old Gus was driving a “hooked-up” car. Also, whenever we ate, drank, or danced, young Gus picked up the tab. Within a few days, Pablo made a life-changing decision. “Gus paid for my shit to come back to New York,” Pablo remembered. “I was like, ‘How the fuck is this little dude gonna pay my shit to come back? How the fuck he got himself a ride?’ So I came home in the summer and saw Gus makin’ money and payin’ for all my shit. I just made the decision. I was gonna make money, man. I said, ‘Fuck it’ and that was it. I mean, I had plans of goin’ back to school. I wanted to play ball. But I had plans of makin’ a little bit of money so that I could be alright when I went back. I just didn’t want to be broke.”

Pablo decided to sell crack. This was not his first encounter with drug dealing. When Pablo was a child, his mother kicked out his older brother because he refused to work or attend school. Later, when Pablo was in his early teens, his brother started showing up in brand new cars. “I didn’t know exactly what he was doin’,” Pablo recalled, “because I was kid. But I liked the cars he was in. He was always in a new one almost every time I saw him.”

Even when he learned that his big brother sold drugs, Pablo passed no judgment. In fact, he saw that no one ever made a big fuss. “I thought that it was alright that he was sellin’ [drugs],” Pablo explained. “Because my mom never said, ‘You better not do that.’ He used to buy her stuff too and she never said, ‘No, I don’t want it. Take it back.’ No one ever said anything, bro. So I didn’t think nothin’ of it.”¹⁰

Sylvio, though, objected. He wanted Pablo to stay out of trouble and pursue his football dreams. Pablo had a special status in our neighborhood; since most of us dabbled in sports, we appreciated his athletic prowess. So when he, in partnership with Gus, approached Sylvio to buy some cocaine, Sylvio said “no.”

But by then, Sylvio had become a true capitalist whose only obligation was to maximize profits. Now, he made money for its own sake; despite making tens of thousands of dollars weekly, he could not turn down a chance to make a few thousand more. He sold Pablo the drugs.

“What made Sylvio give in was money, man,” Pablo recalled. “Me and Gus was buyin’ top dollar off that nigga. He was jerkin’ me and Gus. He was gettin’ his shit dirt cheap and then killin’ us. That nigga Sylvio made a lot of

money from us." Alone, Gus had made about five hundred dollars daily. With Pablo's help, the crack operation ran twenty-four hours a day. So Pablo soon made close to five hundred dollars daily too. Times were looking good. And like many neighborhood youths, I admired his newfound riches and accorded him respect on the money-making gridiron. Also, I basked in our close friendship and eagerly hung out with him as he directed his sales team, collected his money, and treated me to food and drinks. So I rooted for him to reach the financial stars, cheered his success in the drug market—wished that I could one day earn money like him.

But his glory days were numbered. A month after his start, he was arrested for steering a customer (an undercover police officer) to a crack seller. He pled guilty to a felony and was released on probation. His football dreams: Gone.

"The arrest was what sealed the deal, bro," Pablo recalled. "I knew that once I got a felony, I couldn't go back [to school]. I would lose my scholarship, the financial aid, all that shit, bro. I couldn't go back down there because of that shit. So I stayed here."

Shortly after, Pablo was arrested for the same offense and pled guilty. No probation this time. He was sentenced to one year at Rikers island, or "The Rock," the infamous jail where chaos reigned.

IN SUMMARY

Both Gus and Pablo were remarkably loyal to the U.S. achievement ideology. Thus, rather than frame their acts as a rejection of society, we should view them as an acceptance of society's economic, material, and masculine goals. What hardened their capitalist tendencies were their family's business leanings: Carmen was always searching for business investments, and Salazar and Sylvio were savvy drug dealers. Also, Gus' mother, Regina, used some of Salazar's earnings to operate small businesses in the Bronx, and, later, to construct apartment rentals in the Dominican Republic.¹¹ Thus, for their families, the search for *riquezas*, or riches, was important.

This is why I place Pablo and Gus within a U.S. achievement ideology that urges high profit and self-interest—that values money and consumption over non-economic or non-material goals. Therefore, like sociologists Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld, and Robert Merton before them, I found that *economic* crime originates within society, within what it tells people to

want and achieve.¹² Combined with a marginal neighborhood, terrible public schools, little social capital, and the crack era, this increased their *chances* of being sucked into the illegal drug market. And as marginal criminals, they had a high risk for arrest, detainment, and imprisonment. This meant experiencing the brutality of a cruel jail.

Rikers Island.