IN SEARCH OF RESPECT

Selling Crack in El Barrio

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particularly busy corner precisely because of the exciting bustle of activity surrounding it. In my hopeful naiveté I had thought that the eager knots of pedestrians coming and going signaled the location of one of the street fairs that often grace East Harlem streets like a splash of charm in springtime — relics from a small-town past.

In the long run it was not my conspicuous profile as a potential undercover narcotics agent that became my biggest obstacle to accessing crackhouses and copping corners but, rather, my white drug addict profile. I was almost never harassed by the street sellers; at worst, they simply fled from me or ignored me. On the other hand, I was repeatedly stopped, searched, cursed, and humiliated by New York City police officers on the beat. From their perspective there was no reason for a white boy to be in the neighborhood unless he was an undercover cop or a drug addict, and because I am skinny they instantly assumed the latter. Only one time was I able successfully to impersonate a narcotics officer when stopped by angry police officers. I was in a corner grocery store-cum-numbers joint on my block, buying an ice-cream sandwich and a beer with one of Primo’s part-time crack dealer lookouts, when a heavyset white undercover police officer pushed me across the ice-cream counter, spreading my legs and poking me around the groin. As he came dangerously close to the bulge in my right pocket, I hissed in his ear, “It’s a tape recorder.” He snapped backward, releasing his left hand’s grip on my neck, whispering a barely audible “Sorry.” Apparently he thought he had inadvertently intercepted an undercover officer from another unit because before I could get a close look at his face he had exited. Meanwhile the marijuana sellers stationed in front of the bodega, observing that the undercover had been rough with me when he searched through my pants, suddenly felt safe and relieved, confident that I was a white drug addict rather than an undercover; and one of them — the tallest and burliest with flashing eyes that suggested recent ingestion of angel dust — promptly came barreling through the door to mug everyone waiting in line at the cash register.

Many of my approximately bimonthly encounters with the police did not end so smoothly. My first encounter with the police was my worst. It was 2:00 a.m. and I was on a notorious crack-copping corner three blocks from where I lived, chatting with a street dealer who was the former boyfriend of one of my neighbors. He had told me to wait with him because his shift had just ended and as soon as the night manager
collected the receipts he was going "to go party" and he wanted me to accompany him. I was eager to please him; happy that I had finally found an entrée into this new and particularly active crack scene. He was already introducing me to his colleagues and competitors as a long lost friend and neighbor of his "ex-girl," thereby finally dispelling their conviction that I was a police officer. All of a sudden a patrol car flashed its lights, tooted its siren, and screeched to a halt next to us. To my surprise the officers called out to me and not to my crack-dealing acquaintance: "Hey, white boy! Come ovah' hea'h." For the next fifteen minutes I found myself shouted at, cursed, and generally humiliated in front of a growing crowd of crack dealer/addict spectators. My mistake that night was to try to tell the police officers the truth when they asked me, "What the hell you doin' hea'h?" When they heard me explain, in what I thought was a polite voice, that I was an anthropologist studying poverty and marginalization, the largest of the two officers in the car exploded:

What kind of a fuckin' moron do you think I am. You think I don't know what you're doin'? You think I'm stupid? You're babbling, you fuckin' drug addict. You're dirty white scum! Go buy your drugs in a white neighborhood! If you don't get the hell out of here right now, motherfucka', you're gonna hafta repeat your story in the precinct. You want me to take you in? Hunh? . . . Hunh? Answer me motherfucka'!

After ineffectual protests that merely prompted further outrage, I was reduced to staring at the ground, muttering "Yes sir" and shuffling obediently to the bus stop to take the next transportation downtown. Behind me I heard: "If I see you around here later, white boy, ah'ma' take you in!" 9

I eventually learned how to act appropriately. By my second year on the street my adrenaline would no longer pump in total panic when police officers pushed me against a wall and made me stand spread-eagled to be patted down for weapons and drugs. My accent proved to be a serious problem in these encounters because patrol officers in East Harlem are almost always white males from working-class backgrounds with heavy Irish- or Italian-American diction. In contrast to the Puerto Rican and African-American children on my block, who used to marvel at
In Search of Respect

what they called my "television advertisement voice," the police officers assumed I was making fun of them, or putting on airs when I spoke politely to them in complete sentences. I learned that my only hope was to shorten my encounters with the patrol officers by staring at the ground, rapidly handing over my driver's license, and saying "yes-sir-officer" or "no-sir-officer" in minimalist, factual phrases. When I tried to sound sincere, friendly – or even polite – I risked offending them.

Conversely, on the occasions when the police tried to be polite to me their actions only reinforced my sense of violating hidden apartheid laws. On one occasion a squad car overtook me as I was riding my bicycle, to make sure I was not lost or insane: "You know where ya' going? This is Harlem!" Another time as I was sitting on my stoop at sunset to admire the spectacular colors that only New York City's summer smog can produce, a patrolman on the beat asked me, "What're you doing here?" I quickly showed him my driver's license with my address to prove I had a right to be loitering in public. He laughed incredulously. "You mean to tell me you live here! What'sa' matter with you?" I explained apologetically that the rent was inexpensive. Trying to be helpful, he suggested I look for cheap rent in Queens, a multiethnic, working-class borough of mixed ethnicity near New York City's airports.

Racism and the Culture of Terror

It is not merely the police who enforce inner-city apartheid in the United States but also a racist "common sense" that persuades whites, and middle-class outsiders of all colors, that it is too dangerous for them to venture into poor African-American or Latino neighborhoods. For example, when I moved to East Harlem, virtually all of my friends, whether white, black, or Latino/a, berated me for being crazy and irresponsible. Those who still visited me would often phone me in advance to make sure I would meet them downstairs as they descended from their taxis. Indeed, most people still consider me crazy and irresponsible for having "forced" my wife and infant son to live for three and a half years in an East Harlem tenement. When we left the neighborhood in mid-1990, several of my friends congratulated us, and all of them breathed a sigh of relief. 10

Most people in the United States are somehow convinced that they would be ripped limb from limb by savagely enraged local residents if
SCHOOL DAYS: LEARNING TO BE A BETTER CRIMINAL

I was chillin' out most of the time in junior high. But they had like a wild war out there — blacks against Puerto Ricans — and the Puerto Rican kids used to get beat up real crazy.
This guy killed this one kid, so we used to not want to go to school because of that. We used to cut school and go downtown and rob.

Caesar

The complex interfaces among family, school, and peer group are crucial to the construction and enforcement of social marginalization, especially in one's pre-teenage years. Consequently, I purposely collected the childhood, school-age reminiscences of the crack dealers in Ray's network in an effort to explore their early institutional relationships with both mainstream society and inner-city street culture. This also led them to talk about their intimate home lives. Much of this material is presented in this and the following three chapters, where I address changing gender-power relations and the transformations in family arrangements with respect to emotional nurturing and economic stability. In this chapter I focus on the quintessential early-socializing institution of mainstream society in the inner city: the public school. This leads fluidly into street culture's alternative to school — the peer group or the proto-criminal youth crew — gang — which effectively fills the formal institutional vacuum created by truancy. When the crack dealers began confiding to me about their earliest teenage experiences of violence and crime on the street, I was also forced to confront the brutal phenomenon of sexual violence that was central to both their formal and their informal schooling. Consequently, the chapter ends with an analysis of how street-