REDRAWING THE GENDER LINE ON THE STREET

I used to take all my husband's shit. I even used to support my husband, but I woke and smelled the coffee, like they say. And I put a bullet in my man.

Candy

The gang rapes discussed in the preceding chapter were not the isolated brutal excesses of a fringe group of pathological sadists. On the contrary, they provide an insider's perspective on the misogyny of street culture and the violence of everyday life. A biting reminder of the pervasiveness of sexual violence in El Barrio was the comment made to my wife and me by our eleven-year-old neighbor, Angel, in the course of an otherwise innocuous, random conversation about how he was doing in school, and about how his mother's pregnancy was progressing. He told us he hoped his mother would give birth to a boy "because girls are too easy to rape."

Witnessing Patriarchy in Crisis

Focused on in isolation, the crack dealers' accounts of gang rape can overwhelm readers with anger or despair. Women on the street, however, are not paralyzied by terror. On the contrary, they are in the midst of carving greater autonomy and rights for themselves in El Barrio, just as they are among most social classes and ethnic groups in the United States, and throughout much of the nonfundamentalist world. In East Harlem, daughters, sisters, and wives can no longer be beaten submissively and sent upstairs as authoritatively as they were in the past for socializing on the street, or for pursuing careers in the underground economy. As has been the case historically for all major power shifts
between antagonistic groups, the complicated process whereby women are carving out a new public space for themselves is rife with contradictory outcomes and human pain. This is exacerbated by the fact that the fundamental status quo that enforce male domination have not been altered. As many feminist theorists have long since noted, much of the struggles and achievements of women in the past decades have been framed in terms of individual rights that ultimately largely mirror patriarchal models of "empowerment." ¹

As men on the street lose their former authoritarian power in the household, they lash out against the women and children they can no longer control. Males are not accepting the new rights and roles that women are obtaining; instead, they are desperately attempting to reassert their grandfathers' lost autocratic control over their households and over public space. Of course, this does not in any way imply that women in El Barrio, or anywhere else on earth, have provoked male violence against themselves because of their demands for greater rights. Such a blame-the-victim interpretation not only glorifies the stability of previous patriarchal status quo, but also overly individualizes the long-term macrostructural transformation in gender relations that is occurring across the
globe, even if that progressive change is bounded by a liberal, middle-class, and largely Anglo-oriented hegemony.

In the Puerto Rican case, the change in power relations between men and women conflates with a structurally induced wrenching of traditional gender roles as men steeped in jíbaro rural identities confront unemploy-ment and social marginalization in the postindustrial, urban United States. Old-fashioned household economies defined around the productiv-ity of an autocratic male have long been under siege in the Puerto Rican diaspora — especially in the inner city. Men and women whose consciousness harks back to idealized memories of jíbaro sugar cane flatland plantations, highland farming communities, or urban shanty-towns find themselves confined inside the isolated towers of public hous-ing projects surrounded by people they do not know or trust. The highfinance, FIRE sector-dominated economy of New York City does not pay high school dropouts the working-class wages that would allow them to support a nuclear family of four on a single income. The traditional “Spanish ideal” of a large, male-dominated household blessed with nu-merous children is recognized as an anachronism by even the most reac-tionary men and women of the new generations born in New York City.

As noted in Chapter 4 on legal employment, the male head of household who, in the worst case scenario, has become an important, economic failure experiences these rapid historical structural transformations as a dramatic assault on his sense of masculine dignity. Worse yet, the stabilizing community institutions that might have been able to mediate the trauma do not exist in the U.S. inner city. Instead, men struggle violently in a hostile vacuum to hold on to their grandfathers’ atavistic power. The crisis of patriarchy in El Barrio expresses itself concretely in the polarization of domestic violence and sexual abuse.²

In attempting to document this long-term transformation in gender relations, I faced the inescapable problem of how — as a male — I could develop the kinds of deep, personal relationships that would allow me to tape-record conversations with women at the same intimate level on which I accessed the worlds of men. The challenge of engaging in frank, open, respectful dialogue across gender lines is exacerbated in the Puerto Rican street scene by the way the former family-based male authoritarian-ism of past generations has been recast around a concern over sexual fidelity, promiscuity, and public displays of male domination. Although my wife and I had many female friends in the neighborhood, and I tape-
Redrawing the Gender Line

think that the way a man shows you love is by beating you because Coño [expletive], I says, "My father loves me, that's why he's beating me."

I was foolish, because I never got therapy. I never got psychiatry. And I tried to kill myself since I was eleven. The last time I succeeded was the time I was thirty-three. I almost made it that time.

But you know – I've been through a trauma life – but you know, life goes on. And God is with me.

And the doctors knew that I was an abused woman, but because I did not want them to know – because I was a battered woman – they used to cover up for me.

So my husband beat me up.

The psychotherapeutic literature on the battered woman syndrome and on the intergenerational transmission of violence and substance abuse could certainly be applied to Candy. No matter how psychoanalytically appropriate this kind of individualistic, medicalized explanation for Candy's suffering may appear, however, it misses the key structural components to her life experiences. It ignores the systematic dislocation in family structure caused by the massive rural–urban migration of Puerto Ricans to New York City in the post–World War II period. Felix's extreme brutality against Candy, especially during her pregnancies, emerges as an almost caricatural expression of this structural maladjustment, rather than being merely the isolated excesses of a psychopath.

Candy: Felix broke my arm. He did everything to me – once he cracked my head.

I used to get three beatings a night, every day, from when I was thirteen till twenty-one. He made me lose five stomachs [pregnancies]. That's five miscarriages because of him.

I'm talking about five and a half months, five months, four months. Nothing under four months. He used to give me beatings, and I would lose them.

Believe me, you don't even want to know.

Perhaps Felix's sadism was the last agonized gasps of the anachronistic traditional ideal of the large jíbaro family that both he and Candy still
In Search of Respect

maintained, despite being stranded in high-rise housing projects. A generation earlier, Felix's domineering and bullying would have been understood, within limits, as the "legitimate" role of a father coordinating his household laborers for the urgent agricultural tasks of the small family farm. The material basis for the respeto that men commanded on the jibaro hillsides of Puerto Rico, however, is obsolete—and even contraindicated—in Felix and Candy's new postindustrial world. Grotesque as this may seem, perhaps Felix was unconsciously killing the children he and Candy kept producing but could not possibly raise with dignity on their declining access to factory work. Through all of this, however, Candy still desperately holds on to the primacy of males.

Candy: I wanted twelve kids; I only got five—but I wanted twelve. My husband took out five of them with his punches and beatings.

He made me lose five babies. [holding up all the fingers on her right hand]

And the one that I hold against him more, is the one after my daughter—Tabatha—the one that is twenty-one. Because I was six months pregnant, and that baby died due to the reason that he would beat me up.

When I saw that baby, I knew it was a boy. It was dead when it came out, and the only thing that came out was blood clot, because the beatings that he gave were forming a blood clot, instead of performing a baby.

One day, when I came out pregnant with my son, I told Felix, I said, "Maybe, if you won't hit me I will have this baby." He made a promise to God. And look what happened. I had Junior, my only son. [pointing to her thirteen-year-old son hanging out on the crackhouse stoop]

Female Liberation Versus Traditional Sexual Jealousy

When Candy finally shot Felix in the stomach about a month after my first tentatively polite conversations with her in front of the Game Room, everyone supported her. At the time, I hailed it as an emancipatory act of resistance. Candy, however, understood her liberating act as the traditional outburst of a jealous woman who was uncontrollably romantically in love with an unfaithful man. She was desperately holding on to