“POWERS THAT BE”:
APOCALYPTIC AND REVOLUTIONARY NARRATIVES OF RACIAL CAPITALISM IN
THE UNITED STATES

By
KARTIKEYA SABOO

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Powers that Be”: Apocalyptic and Revolutionary Narratives of Racial Capitalism in the United States

by KARTIKEYA SABOO

Dissertation Director:
Fran Mascia-Lees

This dissertation analyzes life after the financial crisis and Great Recession of 2007-09 in a neighborhood straddling a major city and small township on the East coast of the United States. Research participants included members of the professional middle class, lower income residents partially dependent on state support, small business and retail outlet workers, men working in the street economy, and a group of radical activists. The oft-invoked category of “crisis”—denoting a critical turning point and a moment calling for decisive action—had an entirely different valence when seen from the viewpoint of these research participants. The dissertation especially focused on: how young black men in and around the street economy organize their experience of dispossession and pervasive violence. These men assimilated the economic cataclysm into the narrative of a Devil Pact and a secret conspiracy that would culminate in a deadly apocalypse called “The Culling;” the relations, practices, and outlook of a sect-like radical collective who viewed the crisis as proof of an inevitable utopian revolution and their vision of leading the masses towards it; the political implications of a struggle between two men in the
street economy. Seeking to create and lead a group, they enact an alternative conception of politics that refuses forms of democratic participation from which they are excluded. Comparing the convergence of the utopian vision of the radical collective and the dystopian catastrophe predicted by the young black men, this study argued that tales of conspiracy and fantasies of revolution conform to the logic and structure of occult discourses. These discourses, designated in the anthropological record under terms such as “sorcery” and “witchcraft,” index an experience of pervasive menace, where threats to body and wealth emerge from unexpected sources. Such forms of explanation arise when there is a failure of social norms, reciprocity, and mutual recognition. They, just like paranoiac conspiratorial narratives, bespeak an ambivalent relation to power that promises success but also threatens death.

Conspiratorial and radical views also reflect a loss of faith in democratic institutions, free market ideology, and a rejection of the social contract. These responses to the financial crisis and Great Recession allow for a critique of the structural context of long term decline in economic mobility, mass incarceration, and failure of community in an individualistic society living under neoliberal economic and social ideology. Facilitating the extraction of political, symbolic and economic capital, black men emerge as marginal yet integral to the economy and state; placed outside society in prison, or “expended” through internecine or state violence. The hypervisibility of the murdered black body made possible by social movements such as Black Lives Matter must contend with the schisms and shifting alignments of color, contiguity and social class that attenuate possibilities of collective mobilization.
The dissertation used mixed methods for data collection including participant observation and interviews (life history, structured, narrative), census data, news reporting, new media, and informal conversations during daily routines of research participants. These included professionals, working families and the unemployed, men in the informal economy, shopkeepers, community leaders, and state functionaries such as lawyers and politicians. Data was also collected from local volunteer groups, church based formations, and independent activists in advocacy forums ranging from street protests to meetings of governmental bodies and public service providers.
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ethnographically faithful, and alert to insights from unlikely places and times in the anthropological record.

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Introduction

In 2007-08 a crisis shook the global financial system. A “subprime bubble” was said to have burst as mortgage holders began to default on their payments. Leading banks in the U.S. and Europe were invested in securities based on these mortgages, whose values started dropping precipitously. Startling losses of capital rapidly engulfed the financial system and caused a seizure in trading activity in the U.S., Europe, and trading hubs worldwide (Blackburn 2008). According to analysts, academics, and other experts, multiple factors contributed to the crisis: widespread deregulation of banking and finance, removal of barriers between retail and investment banking, the emergence of a secondary market for mortgage-backed securities, a shadow banking system that severed the relation between capital adequacy and accounting oversight, and new, complex financial instruments that enabled unrealistic leveraging of capital, excessive borrowing and ever-riskier investments. Finance was beyond state control via regulation, (Glyn 2006) and perhaps even beyond the control of its very practitioners. The federal government approved the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 to use taxpayer funds for a bailout of institutions whose viability was considered fundamental to the entire economy, that is, those deemed “too big to fail” (Sorkin 2009).¹ A recession—“a significant decline

¹ A financial journalist with a doctorate in social anthropology predicted the crisis and then produced a fine-grained account of the emergence of credit derivatives, an instrument central to the collapse of liquidity in 2007 (Tett 2009). For engaging accounts of trading in the 1980s, and the period immediately prior to public recognition of what was happening by a disillusioned insider, see Lewis 1989, 2015. There are retrospective accounts of the course of events once the crisis was publicly proclaimed and plans of action devised and enacted (Bernanke 2015; Geithner 2014; Paulson 2010). Written by the President and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and then Secretary of Treasury (Geithner), Chair of the Federal Reserve (Bernanke), and Secretary of Treasury (Paulson), they are at points self-serving in tone, and this citation is obviously not meant to imply an endorsement of their views and actions. They provide the perspectives of authoritative insiders, experts whose judgments and discourse this dissertation seeks to set itself off from.
in economic activity spread across the economy,”—struck the U.S. economy.² It became known as the Great Recession, harkening back to the Great Depression of 1929. The financial crisis, the “Bailout,” and the Great Recession became three of the most salient events from this moment in U.S. and global history.³

After working for a few years as a banker on financial access for rural and urban poor, I began graduate studies in the U.S. roughly at the same time as these events occurred. Having dealt with esoteric financial instruments such as derivatives, I expected to follow what was happening with some clarity. And yet, I realized my experience was not enough to understand all the complexities and processes in play. I began to ask what it meant to understand the crisis in this way. Given that the situation changed almost every day and both market players and their overseers were scrambling to grasp what was happening, what purposes might an explanation serve? For whom must such an explanation be formulated?

It was noticeable that the declaration of a crisis itself, this naming, enacted a particular narrative framing of the events and thus a specific understanding of its unfolding, one that allowed some courses of action as it foreclosed others. Regulators themselves were acknowledging that they barely understood some of the complex, risky financial instruments widely in use in the global financial market. Explanations and public proclamation did succeed in drawing attention to obscure financial instruments and processes, but did not render them any more lucid than they were before.

³ Updated overviews of the numbers involved in the bailout, as well as timelines of the process leading up to it have been published (Collins 2015; Varoufakis 2011:147-160).
I was intrigued by the ease with which it was possible to become lost in this seemingly authoritative story of crash and crisis, of the obscure machinations of a small tribe of remote traders threatening to bring the global economy to its knees.

Consequently, the very declaration of a crisis became the question that animates this dissertation: what is a financial crisis? I decompose this question into three possible constituent parts: What is financialization? What is a crisis? What is (or amounts to) an explanation? To address this cluster of interrelated questions, I look to the experiences and meaning-making practices of my interlocutors, residents of RapCity and Sleepytown, New Jersey. I am seeking to study the effects and experiences of this historical moment from an ethnographic viewpoint. For instance, consider a selection of encounters in the field. What might be the following protagonists’ relation to crisis?

(1) Stella, a semi-retired nurse of Caucasian extraction who has lived and worked for over two decades in RapCity, now lives in a cozy two-story abode in Sleepytown with her husband and four cats. Apart from her work and her interest in writing plays, she has for over fifty years been a committed member of the COS, a left-leaning collective. Stella is a staunch anticapitalist and enthusiastically works to recruit more members (especially youth and persons of color, as per the directives of the leadership). She teaches English as a Second Language (ESL) to new immigrants, and follows up on cases of those seeking asylum in the U.S. or arrested for being without papers.

(2) Otis is in his thirties and works in the street economy, independent of the few groups that also work on the border of RapCity and Sleepytown. Reflecting on his life in somber terms, Otis explains that the reason why life is hard is because reality itself is a lie. The crisis did not matter to him much, excluded as he is from financial markets, but he is concerned about the imminent destruction of humanity by the “powers that be.” A circle of young men gravitates around Otis, listening to him and discussing their shared beliefs about “chem trails,” flat earth, and myriad other phenomena. They conclude that everything points to a conspiracy behind the scenes.

(3) Victor is a scientist and a member of the COS. Although he will tacitly acknowledge he never believed a World War III was imminent (or that the COS would lead the revolution in its wake), and says it is difficult to maintain an “apocalyptic vision” of utopia, he continues to be a member about fifty years after joining.

(4) Haider is in his forties, and is now in prison. In 2011, he had recently returned from a stint of incarceration. He engineered a competition with Saleem, another man recently returned from prison to the street economy, with a desire to take over Saleem’s crew
and solidify his status as the “realest” man on the street. He seemed fascinated with this conflict, and patiently established his ascendancy. Arrested twice in rapid succession in 2013 and aware of the inevitable outcome (long term imprisonment) awaiting him, Haider reflected on his prospects next time he returned: “I can’t be hustling on the street no more, I’ll be too old. I guess I’ll rob people.” Strangely, Haider seemed to wilfully trigger his third and final arrest.

The research for this dissertation began in 2010 through a chance encounter with a resident of Sleepytown. In 2011, I moved to live in RapCity, two blocks away from this resident, and did fieldwork over the next two years. Set at the threshold dividing RapCity, a once “Great American City,” and Sleepytown, a small, well-to-do township, this ethnographic study traces the experiential, sense-making dimensions of the present moment in the United States, framed by the events of 2007-08 and characterized by a sense of crisis.

Although the picture becomes more complex as we move into the capillary streets of RapCity, the disjuncture between RapCity and Sleepytown at the border between them is unmistakable, demanding attention. The threshold generally indexes differing daily routines, life circumstances, social class positions, and disparate experiences of financialization and crisis. On one side we have the quaint, gaslight-lit streets of Sleepytown, a politically progressive township that is consciously racially integrated and home of many members of the Black Middle Class, quite a few of them from the Great Society generation. The median household income when I began fieldwork was $113,300. On the other side is RapCity, a historic city that was one of the places of refuge and opportunity for black folk moving north of the Mason-Dixon line during the Great Migration. The median household income was $35,659. RapCity has seen much flux in its racial and ethnic composition. The political representation came to speak for the large African American constituency since the late 1970s, and while it appeared that Cory
Booker’s recent mayoral tenure was going to improve conditions for everyone, eventually it was the commercial and residential enterprises downtown that saw the most changes.

The boulevard, on the corner of which I lived in an apartment building, ran all the way to this downtown center of the city. On this edge of RapCity, there were a few street corner crews working in the informal economy at the time I began fieldwork. New businesses also opened up during 2011-12, curiously at odds with the general trends of the Great Recession and subsequent stagnation.

I use traditional ethnographic methods to interact with the residents of these neighborhoods and those who came to work here: middle class residents, participants in the street economy, unemployed and under-employed young black men, members of a radical collective, and many other residents living on either side of the boundary separating RapCity and Sleepytown, a spatial division outlined further in Chapter 1, “The Invisible Door.” I use an experience-near approach in order to grasp how people relate to and make sense of the crisis. What began to emerge, regardless of what side of the division I encountered, was a picture at odds with the dominant narratives and explanatory models.

The kinds of experiences I interpret here include, for example, property-owning residents’ irritation with people working in the street economy, the “knuckleheads over there.” This, coupled with their frustration and insecurity about future prospects, turned into an urge on the part of these folks for the creation of a gated community, not without ambivalence. I also interpret young black men’s experience of a menace that entails bodily stiffening, heightened alertness, and an approach of suspicion and aggression towards all social exchanges. These men creatively translate this disposition and their
position in social space into an expressive narrative of imminent destruction, a conspiracy that will destroy humankind. Why do they believe reality is a lie? My interpretations also include members of a radical group and their enduring desire for change attached to a teleological vision of a global conflict that will usher in revolution and destroy capitalism. How do they persist in their optimistic hope for over half a century? Finally, I describe crews and individuals working in the street economy and subject to the criminal justice system, and tell the story of a conflict that I interpret as an opening to the fascinating possibilities of a political life at odds with democracy.

Thus a multiplicity of actors signify this historical conjuncture in particular ways, ways that render the expert explanations cited above not without purpose, but somewhat beside the point. Accordingly, neither the articulations of my interlocutors nor my interpretations thereof are intended to probe and problematize the authoritative accounts of financialization, the financial crisis, the Great Recession. Rather, the objective of this dissertation is to offer an alternative viewpoint through a collage of re-significations of crisis as a macro-narrative. I do this through the lens of these diverse, particular, and situated experiences that were a product of my ethnographic encounters. I argue that it is precisely by approaching financialization and crisis from the vantage of the street corner that links, yet separates RapCity from Sleepytown that one can perceive anew a picture of phenomena that exceed “authoritative” conceptualizations. That is to say, it is from an experiential and phenomenological situatedness that one may begin to understand crisis “close up.” Running on tracks variously parallel with and tangential to explanatory models, the subjects of this dissertation give their own meaning to the crisis. They do not explain financialization; rather, they give voice to experiences that are produced in
relation to it. Accordingly, this becomes a study not of denizens living at the margins of society and the state, but of citizens who inhabit its umbilicus, an umbilicus so central that it is not seen.⁴

To clear further ground, let us return for now to the “big story,” the critical narrative that concludes with crisis, and perhaps itself goes into crisis.

**Financialization – Finance takes over the Economy**

The crises bursting in 2007 have been authoritatively read through the lens of “financialization:” the domination of banking, financial investment and speculation over the “real” economy of production.⁵ The crisis drew attention to new forms of market activity, new modes of valorization of capital, the development of complex and risky financial products, and new mechanisms of securing the future,⁶ by risking wealth

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⁴ I do not treat meaning making as synonymous with conceptualization, which is a process of arresting meaning at the cost of reducing plurality and complexity into a frame that seeks to imprison an excess of meanings. These narratives do not aim to serve as counter-conceptualizations of, or oppositional interventions into, authoritative conceptualizations. It is an apposite moment also to clarify that perhaps the forms of conceptualization that market and state actors developed, the arrest of meaning they sought to achieve, were necessary. The lives of my interlocutors, however, were not subject to the same demands or constraints, neither were they endowed with such privileges or prerogatives. The market was supposedly functioning, and then it supposedly stopped functioning as an outcome of the same actions, frameworks, assumptions and processes that had coordinated this functioning. Whether they found fractures or continuities in their experiences as a result was a greater concern.

⁵ For an early statement of this distinction and asymmetry, see Hilferding 1981. For a definition, and analysis of the financialization of mortgage markets implying a change from facilitating homeownership to facilitating global investment, see Aalbers 2008, which also notes the delaying quality of mortgage financing, a “spatio-temporal fix” to periodic crises of accumulation (Harvey 2003).

⁶ This is especially relevant; the growth of mutual funds and pension funds has been stupendous, rising in three decades (1968-99) from 0.1 to 1.7 times the size of nonfinancial corporations (Duménil and Lévy 2004:110-112). This points to changes in conceptions and management of earned income and signals the financialization of future (post-retirement) security. At the same time, one must note that this is a reflection of a change in the financialization process (which has been afoot longer), specifically the growth of stock volatility, and especially the increased transfer of such investments to institutional entities. These corporations in turn become behemoths, large players in a new financial regime that intermediates between the market and households (those that invest and those that do not). Volatility can now destabilize whole institutions rather than discrete households, and this has severe interlocking effects on other institutions in the market. Also see below on the implications for personal finance.
through investment in the markets. Financialization refers to an intensification of global financial circulation and the dominance of finance capital over production capital in the “Post-Fordist” (Amin 1994; Stockhammer 2008) economy (Foster 2007; Gowan 1999; Orhangazi 2008; Vasudevan 2008). Profit is increasingly seen to derive from financial interests rather than from trade and commodity production (Arrighi 1994). This process is said to have emerged with a prior crisis in capitalism, the crisis of “stagflation” that followed profitability pressures in the 1970s and heralded the shift from local investment in industrial production towards financial products (Harvey 2005, 2010). Increasing financial deregulation since the 1980s, and a steady permeation of financial value and investment-related elements in market processes, corporate decision-making, and individual economic activity were salient features of this process (Blackburn 2006, 2008; Foster 2007; Froud et al. 2006; Gowan 1999, 2009; Krippner 2005; Vasudevan 2008). A movement attacking the welfare orientation of the state also gradually took hold.

For the individual and household, the globalization and pervasiveness of finance has entailed the privatization of risks (Hacker 2006; Maurer 1999) and “the increasing financial commodification of the life course, such as student debt or personal pensions…marketing of credit cards or the arrangement of mortgages” (Blackburn 2006:39). In all arenas of personal financial management (such as basic banking services, investment of savings in mutual funds, risk mitigation through insurance and retirement planning through pension funds), citizens have been recast as ‘citizen-investors,’

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7 For an alternative, longer-range periodization of the hegemony of finance within capitalism, which locates the first moment of financialization in the 1890s, see Duménil and Lévy 2004. Engelen 2008 contains a survey of the contemporary emergence of “financialization” in the social sciences.

8 Culminating, one could argue, with the passage of the aptly named Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996) during the administration of Bill Clinton. State support for its citizens is now predicated on the reconciliation of work opportunities with an evaluation of personal responsibility, that is, an evaluation of the worthiness of potential recipients.
ostensibly freed from the paternalistic constraints of the state and empowered with
greater choice and control through the advent of modern technologies that provide direct
interfaces with a variety of financial services and entities (Harmes 2001; Martin 2002).\(^9\)
The massive expansion of consumer credit in the 1990s (Hacker 2006), during which the
debt levels of the average family rose by 53% (Vasudevan 2008), and those of lower
income families rose even higher (Draut and Silva 2003), is the signal expression of the
financialization of domestic provisioning.\(^10\)

**The Great Recession**

Notwithstanding the aforementioned bailout, this unprecedented seizure in
financial markets produced a wide and deep stagnation in the U.S. economy. This phase
of decline, which lasted from December 2007 through June 2009, was termed the “Great
Recession.” The Great Recession was officially deemed to have ended by the National
Bureau of Economic Research.\(^11\), depressed economic activity in parts of the country,\(^12\)
joblessness, loss of income for those working at lower than pre-crisis wages, and those
working two jobs to make ends meet continue to plague the economic system.\(^13\) As well,
the so-called period of recovery has seen as much loss in median household income as

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\(^9\) However, this “nirvana of individual economic management” (Hacker 2006:6) occludes “the velocity of
change in the financial marketplace, the gulf between current consumer skills and those needed to
understand today’s complex nonstandardized financial products” (Willis 2008:197).

\(^10\) This aspect of financialization, its relation to the consumer credit boom, is often not recognized,
associated as is generally is with exchange of claims over a variety of financial instruments and
assessments of risk on repayments of a variety of debts in the future (Langley 2008).

\(^11\) [http://www.nber.org/cycles/cyclesmain.html](http://www.nber.org/cycles/cyclesmain.html), accessed January 26, 2016. Also see
[http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/moneymatters/a/When-Did-The-Great-Recession-End.htm](http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/moneymatters/a/When-Did-The-Great-Recession-End.htm)

\(^12\) Clark 2014 contains a closer reading of the regionally variegated impact in the U.S. as well as UK. See
Garson 2013 for interview-based accounts of struggling families across the U.S. during the Great
Recession, along with an analysis of wage stagnation and credit-dependence indicating the continuities
prior to 2007.

\(^13\) For a lucid analysis of longer-term structural trends (supply-demand mismatches, wage decline and the
relation between rising debt and expenses on basic needs) that had as much if not more to do with the crisis
and recession, see Reich 2010.
during the 2007-2009 period of the recession itself (Kochhar 2012). Especially notable is the near complete “lost decade”: a lack of growth in middle class wealth, as well as a greater concentration and polarization of wealth, processes that were in motion before, and deepened during the crisis and recession. Polarization of inequality has been reinforced during the same period, with an increase in aggregate wealth for the top 7% households, and decline for the rest (Fry and Taylor 2013). Poverty rose to 13.2% (Rosenberg 2010). Further, losses tracked the intersecting vectors of inequality – race and class – with low-income non-whites losing the largest relative share of wealth during the downturn (Pfeffer et al. 2013) and recovering the least since the official end of the Great Recession (Pfeffer et al. 2013; Taylor et al. 2011).

Scholarly and “expert” understandings of the historical origins, the technical aspects, and the effects of these dual phenomena – the crisis and the Great Recession – have since proliferated in academic forums and mainstream media. Some of these examinations raised larger questions about the sustainability of the financial system and the regulatory role of government, and even of the merits and evils of capitalism. Nine years from 2007, there is greater receptivity and knowledge in the general public about obscure financial instruments and practices. As the incomprehensible and remote Wall


The decline in retirement savings and household equity, and the rise of credit card debt has also been linked with the need to meet daily living expenses (Draut and Silva 2003, 2004; McGhee and Draut 2004; Silva 2005).

15 The mechanics of the upheaval were described largely in terms of crucial moments and processes, such as particular kinds of deregulation, easing of controls on forms of lending and required capital adequacy, the emergence of sophisticated and complex financial instruments that allowed for the creation of new tradable securities, risk management instruments that actively bet on risks coming to pass, and so on.

16 A new set of banking regulations were passed to supersede the one under whose aegis the crisis occurred.
Street machinations leading up to the crisis begin to find their way into mainstream film (e.g., “The Big Short”), suffice it to say that some of those “in the know” have pointed out that the problems that caused the crisis, especially the size and scale of banks, have still not been tackled effectively. This, after an almost incalculable adrenalin injection in the form of the Bailout, countless debates in legislative bodies, and a wide-ranging revamping of the regulatory template.

**Crisis – in the Economy, and of Meaning**

In the scholarly and expert formulations cited so far, finance becomes a privileged sign, singled out and integrating or assimilating to itself a plethora of events, processes, and outcomes. A narrative is thus created that organizes and explains the historical development of structural, governance, and market processes that present the situation we face today: extreme polarization of wealth, evisceration of public infrastructure and the state’s mandate for maintaining the same for all citizens; and an extreme individualism offered as the disposition appropriate to cope with this welter of complex financial instruments and arcane market processes and somehow translate one’s labor into stability and security.

The crisis was organized into this storyline, with financialization serving as the broad naming that folded within itself a variety of social, political, and economic trajectories. Financialization, therefore, inscribes meaning. It binds the financial crisis

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18 One could also take a slightly different historicizing and scholarly tack using another master term, neoliberalism; or even, neoliberal financialization, which could be a felicitous combination of the two. The social and economic transformation characterized as neoliberalism (Harvey 2005, 2006) actualizes a conception of the financial subject as an enterprise unto herself, labor being an income stream to be activated and managed (Foucault and Senellart 2008; Lemke 2001; Tribe 2009). Concomitantly, the state regulates (largely by deregulating) the financial industry to facilitate further capital accumulation, recently
and the Great Recession together. It also seeks to make comprehensible the virtual marketplace of securitization, derivatives, credit default swaps, algorithm-based automatic trading done by software at the speed of infinitesimal seconds. Scholars have sought to ground these processes through an examination of human actors involved, networks of human and nonhuman actants (and their agencements) and the formatting of economic action, the performativity of economic theories, postsocial sociality, the meanings of money itself, as well as failures of signification thereof. Yet, as finance escaped regulation, so it seems to escape and exceed its inscription in these scholarly narratives. As someone who has worked in finance, I can testify to this disconnect between financial processes and the knowledge about them. At the core is an uncertainty even for those who ostensibly understand what they are putting in motion when making a decision. Further, as concerns personal finance, efforts at linking one’s own personal

passing regulations that reduce the ability of citizens to handle economic shocks such as foreclosures wrought by the financial crisis and recession (“The Fed and Foreclosures” http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/29/opinion/29mon2.html?_r=1&emc=eta1. Accessed December 6, 2010). As the market becomes an inner and regulatory principle of the state (Lenke 2001:196, 200), the state intervenes “in favour of the market rather than because of the market” (Donzelot 2008:124; italics added). The financial crisis and the aftermath of bailout and recession appear consonant with the logic of neoliberalism that seeks to create self-governing and “numericized” citizens (Rose 1991) as the state and corporations withdraw from civic responsibility (Hacker 2006:7). See below for further discussion of the choice of “financialization” for the purposes of this study.

On the “performativity” of economic theories, bringing into reality what they describe rather than describing extant reality, see MacKenzie et al (2007) and Mackenzie (2007). For a general statement on the study of economy from a post-human perspective informed by the science and technology studies STS paradigm, see (Caliskan and Callon 2009, 2010) Interdisciplinary studies of financial markets of advanced capitalist societies have examined the design and implementation of new marketplaces as “experiments in economic rationality” (Zaloom 2003, 2006). Modern financial markets and entities provide new sites for ethnography [such as financial firms, stock exchanges (Hertz 1998), trading floors and trading rooms (Zaloom 2003, 2006)], and new themes of study, such as the impact of technology on new forms of representation and interpretation (Cetina 2007; Cetina and Bruegger 2002a, b; Zaloom 2003), sociality and object-attachments in a virtual environment (Cetina and Bruegger 2000, 2002a), the struggles of financial professionals to embody the market and its “real-time” nature (Ho 2005, 2009a, b), and the translation of computational tools such as spreadsheets into calculators for personal life strategies (Miyazaki 2000).

To be sure, the mainstream capitalist imagination of finance is not without alternatives (Maurer 2002; Maurer 2004, 2005). These range from alternative financial forms such as Islamic mortgages (Maurer 2006) to “social currencies” that become marked with the imprints of sociality, charged with signification as they circulate (Zelizer 1989, 1998, 2000).
fortune in any reasonably coherent and linear way to financial market processes generally leads to missing links, denials, and compromises in the argument or logic one might be trying to create for self-understanding. Not only did I know this as I reflected on my own professional experience, I also learned this in the field as I saw repeated shudders, shakes of the head, and grunts of frustration when I spoke to middle class residents about their mortgages and investments. Stella simply threw her bank and portfolio statements away as they were delivered in the mail every month.

**What do we know, and what do we fail to learn?**

To recapitulate, what do we know? Around the 1970s, the era of post-war prosperity in the industrial-capitalist Keynesian welfare state was beginning to face varied economic and political pressures. Banks increasingly became dominant players in the movement of capital simultaneously as the search for profits drove production towards the global south. Signaled by the election of Ronald Reagan in the U.S. and Margaret Thatcher in the U.K., and buttressed by free market ideologues such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, a new regime of austerity began to take hold. Labor unions lost salient political battles (the Air Traffic Controllers in 1981 in the U.S., the coal miners in 1985 in the U.K.) indicating a decline in their ability to successfully negotiate conditions of work and welfare for the working class. Simultaneously as the civil rights, youth, and women’s movement consolidated the achievements of their struggles, the takeover movement took hold in the corporate sector: mergers and acquisitions and subsequent asset stripping (production capacity, unprofitable lines of business, human resource). This process was driven hard by financial institutions, and aggressive lobbying facilitated deregulation. In the world of business knowledge, a
managerial discourse of shareholder value took hold, inexorably supplanting a previously
dominant rhetoric of labor and community stake-holding in corporate mandates.²⁰

What do we not know, or rather, what have we failed to learn from these
explanations? This title—“financialization”—and these explanatory stories do not always
account for the experiences and meaning-making exercises of people witnessing and
living through these historic moments. How do we make sense of macro-economic
narratives of crashing financial markets and plummeting GDPs when they are but words
that are heard, while experience instead is the pursuit of stability, security, and safety
from violence? What might we conclude when, along with fear of violence, experience
also includes the pursuit of violence as a response to structural inequality that predates
both the 2007-08 financial crisis and the ensuing Great Recession? In other words, how
do we understand words such as these, alternatively mumbled and shouted by a street
corner habitué and echoed by others:

Crisis? What crisis?! Shit been fucked up. I’m maintaining today. I was
maintaining last year I guess, and the year before that, and the year before
that, you feel me? Shit, I couldn’t tell you the last time when I was doing
better than now… [But I] can’t call it man, can’t complain.
We can certainly accrue this verbalization to financialization, placing it within the
longer history of economic decline and rising inequality. As we assimilate this narrative
to inequality, marginality, and dispossession (and without doubt, they are constitutive of
this experience), this subaltern voice is historicized, placed in an authoritative narrative,
given history (Spivak 1994; Wolf 1983). At the same time, how does this articulation,
and many others like this that I encountered in the field, point to the experience of the

²⁰ See Dodd (1931, 1932) and Berle (1932) for early statements of opposing positions on the relation
between management, ownership and society. For a contemporary ethnographic study of some of the issues
raised by shareholder value, see Ho (2009b).
person who points to the crisis (and implicitly to authoritative narratives thereof) as a non-event, who tells us that this is nothing new, perhaps it has always been like this for him? Further, is this accrual and assimilation not predicated on the constitution of this person first as subaltern and as without history?

My intent is not to simply subvert, or deconstruct the master terms and explanatory models and “problematize” them or their import for understanding. That kind of anti-structure intent is eventually still in thrall to the master term. Further, an accrual of one more story, or the four stories told here, as a contribution to the understanding of financialization simply places them as stops on a journey that leads again to the Big Story and the master term. Instead, I am keen to adhere to a disciplinary division of labor that focuses on the little stories, the daily experiences and articulations that I came in touch with during my fieldwork. Knowledge produced in this way is specific to the method adopted – living with and listening and talking with individuals. As a scholar in training taught by other scholars, it is my responsibility to be aware of the Big Story. Yet, for now I seek to resist seeing the field and individuals in the field as exemplifications, instantiations, or problematizations of the Big Story. The work of critical political

21 It is for a similar reason that I have used the term “financialization,” rather than neoliberalism or neoliberal financialization to prepare the backdrop for this ethnographic study. Neoliberalism is a historical articulation of a specific view of the economy and society (the reframed centrality of the state as the core agency being its most salient feature), and neoliberal financialization is an account of the historical process and events that show the life of neoliberalism in the world. In this sense, neoliberal financialization could as well describe the Big Story of the last 45 years. Financialization seems more apt to me mainly for the reason of specificity – it was the dominance of financial institutions (and the complex technologies they use) that culminated in the financial crisis, and the state action of using citizen contributions to bail out institutions was primarily directed towards these financial institutions. This is the delimited work of context setting I want this chosen term to do here. There are attempts at creating greater theoretical specificity for, and “pinning down” neoliberalism as it proliferates into multiple conceptual constructs and applications (Brenner et al. 2010; Wacquant 2012); and similarly for financialization (Engelen 2008). Yet, and this is more to the point, these explanations proliferate while escaping these very attempts at precision and fixing. Just like this could be a study assimilated to financialization, it could just as well be incorporated into these other terms.
scientists, economists, historians, and sociologists must inform us, but it neither
necessitates grand assaults based on anthropological fieldwork, nor should it obliterate-
through-assimilation the experiences of concrete individuals encountered in the field.

Rather, my dissertation is predicated on the view that the street corner habitué, the
Black middle class woman, the young Black male, and the Caucasian radical activist are
central to this broad process designated above with the words “financialization,”
“financial crisis,” “great recession,” “neoliberalism,” “neoliberal financialization,” et
cetera. It is to their experiences that I turn in this dissertation. However, these master
terms and grand narratives are not absent from the accounts of these interlocutors, as
should become clear in the chapters that follow. Nonetheless, this dissertation does not
seek to “fit” these accounts of experience into those privileged terms; instead, it asserts
multiple meanings given to financialization and crisis and the experience produced by
them. Having cleared some ground with the foregoing, below is the outline of chapters
followed by the frames that conjoin these multiple meanings into interpretive readings.

Outline of Chapters

1. The Invisible Door
2. Paranoia, Mistrust, Suspicion

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22 For a pugnacious and trenchant attack on structural forms of neoliberal marginalization and punitive
governance, see the ethnographically grounded work of Löic Wacquant (1993, 1996, 1997, 1998a, b,
2001a, b, 2002, 2004, 2008b; 2009; 2010a, b, 2012; 2010c). For the impact of declining wages and the
evisceration of welfare and workfare, see Collins 2008, Collins and Mayer 2010, and on the dependence on
credit cards and peripheral financial service providers see Williams 2004. On the vulnerabilities of the
middle class, see the journalistic and closely attentive studies by Barbara Ehrenreich (1989, 2002 [2001],
2005); also see the analyses of dependence on credit cards and vulnerability to life events such as sickness
and divorce for the middle class (Sullivan et al. 2000; Warren and Tyagi 2003).
Separately, there is a growing body of work on the mass incarceration paradigm and its pernicious effects
on communities of color (Alexander 2012; Clear 2007; Garland 2001a, b; Gottschalk 2010; James 2007;
Thompson 2010). It is important to note here that this selection ranges across disciplines and is not limited
to anthropological studies. One of the guiding impulses of this dissertation has been to contribute what
might be an anthropological perspective while being informed by studies in other disciplines.
Chapter 1: The Invisible Door

The dissertation unfolds with Chapter 1, “The Invisible Door” at the threshold between RapCity and Sleepytown, a spatial and lived difference that is heightened at this physical conjuncture. It situates the phenomenon of daily life in these contiguous but diametrically opposed neighborhoods. I describe moments on the street as Rahim taught me the correct bodily posture and attitude of vigilance to be safe, and not appear out of place. We also meet Saleem, a central protagonist in the conflict that developed between two men and their crews that is the subject of Chapter 5. In Sleepytown, we meet Stella as she takes us for a walk around her neighborhood after a group meeting. She “naturally” turns at the intersection of Sleepytown and RapCity, and my question interrupts this bodily project of defining her own space. “What is over there [on that side that you do not consider part of your habitat]?” “Oh that? That’s nothing,” says radical, progressive, revolutionary Stella. We also meet her husband Doug. We learn about his individualist aspirations as well as his desire to be far away from this place, as he does not want to die where he was born. Nina bridges the two places as she insists on driving me the two blocks to my home after a frustrated and despairing meeting of the Block Association. We are caught in an impasse as I get out of the car, Nina waiting for me to get inside safely as I wait for her to leave and begin her journey back home (a journey of about one minute).

I use a phenomenological approach to interpret these encounters and the varied gestures and movements that the protagonists of this chapter offered to inscribe and define their space and their way of living in this place. Some of the concerns of those in
Sleepytown relate to loss of incomes and decline in property values, while those in RapCity respond to questions about the crisis and recession as if they were non-events for them. Together, these interlocutors construct and maintain this municipal boundary, turning it into an expression of different horizons of possibility. On both sides, daily life consists of certain bodily projects that animate the stark difference in the built environment and life experiences, setting the stage for a closer examination of some of the meaning-making practices of my interlocutors on either side of the invisible door.

Different scenes and moments from this place evoke a sense of the nature of a division that is quite visible, and simultaneously tacit and “invisible” to the inhabitants. The divisions—across social class, built environment, and bodily hexis—create the backdrop to the divergent experiences of the protagonists and their stories, told in the subsequent chapters. What emerges are two spaces in one place; the invisible door exemplifies the impossibility of crossing over—metaphorically and most often even physically—such that no “community” emerges amongst neighbors.

Furthermore, in relating certain forms of bodily position and disposition to movements of the police and other men in the informal economy relates to a “prestigious imitation… imposed from without” (Mauss 1979 [1934]:74). That I learned from Rahim what many others seemed to be inattentive to by the time I left the field (younger men coming into informal activities but without affiliation or belonging to social formations such as gangs) shows ruptures in social and cultural transmission.

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23 Marcel Mauss noted the significance of morphological and ecological features on the social life of a group in a specific place, (1979 [1906]) as well as the specificity of “attitude[s] of the body,” which contain aspects of both mimesis and education (1979 [1934]:71, 73).
Chapter 2: Paranoia, Mistrust, Suspicion

Chapter 2 explores the vivid and dramatic narrative constructed by Otis and his fellows as they consider their prospects and seek to understand their relation to life in this corner of the United States. Acutely aware that there is every chance things will not turn out well, they develop a creative narrative to orient themselves, in the process critiquing the given coordinates for understanding reality and achieving success—hard work, playing by the rules, meritocracy, opportunity—that have begun to offer less and less purchase. It is not simply dispossession and marginalization that moves them, for they are economic subjects. No matter how removed from the processes of financialization, Demaine, William, Isaac, Otis and others are earners, consumers, and sources of profit, eventually linked in one way or another to capital accumulation. It is the unpredictable and threatening nature of social reality that moves them to fashion a tale of conspiracy. My interpretation compares the logic and structure of this discourse that predicts an apocalyptic end to that of other beliefs in the occult, and concludes that the discourse of witchcraft offers a felicitous comparison. Mysterious as finance is, the reality of violence on the street is also inhabited in such a way that economic and physical threats appear without provenance. The story of a conspiracy, akin to witchcraft in other societies, does not fix the misfiring social institutions that have neglected the potential of these men. Neither does it offer lasting relief; just as in other cultures where once a source of misfortune is dealt with, another appears in its wake. Given no recognition of a form that they can accept from a society that remains racist, a malevolent power seems to issue from the social itself. Otis and others are feeling “affected” (Favret-Saada 2012). The argument of Chapter 2, and one of the central arguments of this dissertation is that the
speech of Otis and his fellows, on a streetcorner in the United States, conforms to the logic and structure of witchcraft discourse.

Chapter 3: A Separation

Chapter 3 is about Stella’s life and her fraught relationship with Doug, her third husband, and their separation. Why could Stella and Doug not get along? What made Stella convert to an ideology of Internationalism? What makes it difficult for Stella to relate in the present? How did I become an element in the story of their separation? Stella and Doug’s relationship was the story of an individualist and a die-hard internationalist coming together and eventually, falling apart.

I treat the story as a clash between ideology and experience. Doug seeks to live in the here and now, seizing life where he can. Stella lives only for the future, embracing an apocalyptic utopia to enact the same denial of experience that the ideology of the Party in the USSR enacted. Life becomes indexed for Stella by something which is outside of lived experience. This is dually so, it is outside—spatially, geographically and historically—the experience of 1930s Stalinism, which Stella and the COS have not experienced. As well, it is outside the spatial and historical dimension of Messianic Stalinism that they will not experience. It issues from a conceptual non-place (Augé 1995), Stalinism in the United States. In between this historical outside, and this future of the ecstasy of revolution, Stella’s life is suspended. In a certain sense, experience, the everyday reality becomes the absent Stalin, the dis-encounter with the other as alluded to

24 Of course, Augé’s (1995) idea of non-places issues from an analysis of physical sites of transience that become significant in what he refers to as the era of “supermodernity.” In the sense that life passes through such places, without resting in them or providing a stable engagement with place qua place, the idea resonates with the kind of suspension between the past and the future that emanates from and for the COS.
in the chapter “The Invisible Door.” This is what prevents the actual, spatial, experiential crossing of the street.

The aperture to the story of the COS as a collective, Stella’s situation is reflected in a conflict with her ex-husband Roger, and a refusal to mourn the tragic passing of her adopted son. Her marriage and motherhood are attempts at occupying a space; a response to individualism and bourgeois life, and to racism. She wants to redeem her husband, her son, from the evils of the system.

Stalin and communism are the ideal foil for Stella’s life. The figure of Stalin is a fetish, and it can become a way to criticize capitalism. Like a fetish, it is misrecognized. At the same time, the absence of Stalin himself, or his living ideology in the world, allows for optimistic and imaginative forms of projection that can be nurtured endlessly. As with Stalin, so it is with interpersonal relationships. They either accord with a teleology, or they become suppressed, until the dynamic becomes unbearable. Doug eventually engineers the separation. Perhaps life for Stella had also become unbearable with this individualist. In this chapter and in chapter “Trusting Bourgeois Anthropologists,” I have also made a beginning towards reading this relation to the idea of internationalist utopia and the relation to significant others and COS members as a form of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2008, 2011), an attachment that does not cease but instead simply perpetuates one’s relationship to life and hope, an affect that finds an object yet finds it elusive to enact, to “articulate” in life. It is precisely because of the fetishistic character of this object that this attachment persists in potentiality, never coming closer, and never fading either. Instead, first-generation members of the COS defer the utopia’s concrete realization beyond their lives.
Stella was much, much more than a primary interlocutor or “key informant.” From the chance encounter that brought us in touch, to the time I spent living in RapCity and beyond, Stella became a part of my life and that of my family. It is not that either of us thought of it this way, but looking back, if there was one fictive kin relation that was created during fieldwork, it was my relation with Stella. This is not simply an appreciation of how close we became, but also an integral part of the knowledge produced in this encounter with this generous, passionate, and idealistic woman. The chapter on Stella’s life as I learned about it and participated in it was the lens through which I came to understand the COS. These two chapters are integral and must be seen as such. Many of the themes that hint themselves in the descriptive exposition of Chapter 3 are developed in the analysis presented in Chapter 4. The organization of the material into two chapters is done for purposes of length, focus, and structure. But it also has the felicitous consequence of giving the story of Stella an independent and unique position in this dissertation.

Chapter 3 contains the most fraught interpretations of this dissertation. Apart from the account above, this chapter also brought home the emotional cost of “participant-observation.” Not simply a matter of exiting the field, gaining distance, and achieving some measure of whatever we understand today by objectivity; not even of dealing reflexively with some form of crisis of representation. All anthropological interpretations are interventions into a socially constructed and historically contextual reality. At the same time, they are products of human relations. While the “crisis of representation” pointed to the status of ethnographies as texts and demanded a greater concern with reflexivity, there is no doubt that the tensions, pleasures, antagonisms and emotions that
scholars have reflexively paid closer attention to over the last three decades were part of participant-observation before. Rather, it was when writing of Stella that I encountered and struggled with both the internalized censors of anthropology today, as well as the external pressures of balancing my role as an ethnographer with my presence as an entity in Stella’s life. It was not a question of gaining distance, but of feeling like Stella is so close that to write about her was in itself uncomfortable. It was a discomfort that I could overcome more easily in the case of others who, because they became my friends, barely feature or do not feature at all in this dissertation. With Stella, it went much deeper: writing about her was hard, but not writing about her was impossible.

Chapter 4: Trusting Bourgeois Anthropologists

Chapter 4 delves into the practices, rhetoric, and expressions of the COS. Why does this collective continue to believe in a teleology that seems widely discredited in general and at odds with political reality in particular? How do members of the COS square their beliefs with the reality of their lives? Why a stark fetishization of violence, so at odds with their sedate lives? Internationalism as the COS conceives it is an attack on racism and bourgeois life. But the reality all members of the COS live in is structured as a “bourgeois” and racist one, exactly the reality of capitalism as it obtains in the United States, exactly the reality they wish to destroy completely. This prevents the COS from envisaging anything but a total (and it would seem totally impossible) destruction of all forms of life other than a internationalist one as defined by them. This is what suspends them, unable to move from between the actual historic revolution that inspired them and the idea of a global revolution that should not arrive before their death.
I argue that in this attempt to maintain a purity of belief, a lack is maintained through the denial of experience. The COS becomes compelled to live in a reality of disencounter. Suspended in a language that they refuse to accommodate or modify adequately for the present situation, they exemplify the absence of a political present for ideologies of internationalism or socialistic vision in the United States. The curious adoration of Stalin is instructive in this regard, the zealous urge to identify “fascism,” the old enemy in present phenomena is another; as is a gratuitously violent vision of revolution (World War III, and the general tenor of their discourse and publications). Stalinism was not about revolution; if anything, it was about terror. Not only does this justify their violent vision, it also allows them to displace the spatial inability to cross the street (from Sleepytown into RapCity, from their middle class positions into the “proletariat,” the “underclass,” the “precariat”) into a temporal teleology that can never be fulfilled. This allows history—a key Marxian category—to become metaphysical, beyond life philosophically and beyond their lives concretely (pace the deferral of revolution beyond their lives).

A brief historical note here, to indicate other possibilities that informed the description, but were not taken up:

Upstate New York has been historically the heart of revivalist sects, the “burned over district” (Cross 1950). It was here in the 1830s that Charles Finney and Lyman Beecher led evangelical revivals that redefined what it meant to be a believer in God. As Paul Johnson notes, “the revival of 1831… marked the acceptance of an activist and millennialist evangelicalism as the faith of the northern middle class… Within a few
years free agency, perfectionism, and millennialism were middle class orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{25} (Johnson 1978:5) The deep religiosity of U.S. Americans and the link between religion and social control was noted by Tocqueville (1945:Vol.1). One cannot help but note the resonance between the self-perception and conviction of revivalist movements, evangelical sects, and COS. They too believe they are the Elect, the wholly good. They too attribute monstrous powers to their adversary. Contrary to all reasonable evidence, they remain assured of ultimate triumph. Max Weber, who built his theory of the protestant ethic influenced in part by a visit to the United States, claimed that the dominant groups’ religious needs determine the society’s dominant religion (Weber 1946). However, the question that presents itself is, what does a marginal sect-like group like the COS do in a society where they certainly do not determine the dominant “religion”? They brought the good word to the workers, but U.S. workers did not respond as they might have hoped. Further, what needs does the religious belief in communism serve for members of the COS in the milieu of financialized capitalism? Is it simply another set of alternative beliefs, much like New Age Spirituality, for those who feel alienated from mainstream U.S. society? Or must it be treated as it was until the end of the Cold War, an ideology that stood as a viable counterpoint to capitalism as a method of organizing society? This question again runs the COS into the shores of the political reality of the United States. They are Communists living in the heartland of anti-socialism, a place where Marxist discourse has been late to arrive, and one where it has failed to remain viable beyond the McCarthyite era of paranoid politics. Today, Marxist analysis may find its place in the academy in the United States, but in few other places,  

\textsuperscript{25} Also see Cross 1950 for an account of revivalism in the Northeast.
except in a few other groups like the COS, holdovers from the 1960s. Socialism remains a pejorative term, as we saw most recently in slanders against Barack Obama prior to and during his presidency.\textsuperscript{26} Perhaps Bernie Sanders’s polemical self-identification as a socialist might signal a change in wider discussions about the role of collective obligation in personal salvation.

This brief allusion to the sect-like nature of the COS is a structural understanding of the group. My concerns are directed more towards the relationship of individual members to capitalism and anti-capitalism.\textsuperscript{27}

**Chapter 5: Glory**

Chapter 5 thus tells the story of a socially dishonored group. Rather it is the story of a persona, the figure of the “black male.” This focus on “persona” rather than “a group” is in keeping with the individualized ethic and rhetoric of U.S. society that provides the “cultural glue” which holds together the marketization of life, the punitive and stigmatizing transformation of welfare, and the rise of mass incarceration as a tool for managing the resultant social disorder. In keeping with this individuation, this chapter tells the story of a dramatic conflict between Haider and Saleem.

From the vantage of a daily life lived in this context, commerce in the illegal economy on the street frames one’s investment in a certain kind of life and the imaginative possibilities it offers. This life is one contoured by forms of scarcity and

\textsuperscript{26} For the COS, Obama is liberal and hence a fascist, while socialism for them is a halfway house back to capitalism. Rejecting the two-stage theory of socialism leading to communism, their objective is immediate abolition of wages and money following the revolution. According to COS, this critique and the category of “superexploitation” that explains racism, are their original contributions to Marxist theory and praxis. In their own understanding of their own analysis, they truly stand alone.

\textsuperscript{27} It is for the same reason that this ethnographic study does not seek to assimilate the COS to the history of the turbulent 1960s, or the broader social movement literature.
animated by competitive aggression at its center. Building on studies of honor in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, in Chapter 5 I argue that through struggles over material (turf) and non material (honor) scarcities, the protagonists open up for themselves possibilities of a fascinating political life with violence at its center. Given the uncertainty of voice and tenuousness of personal relationships, and a life attached to instruments of aggression (drugs, guns), black men in the street economy fight over honor and for glory.

This chapter examines how, committed to instruments of aggression and the reality of a life they recognize and abandon themselves to, black men working in the illicit economy on the street struggle with each other. Refusing their stigmatization by whatever constitutes the gestalt we call “mainstream normativity,” these men fight for precedence among their brethren. Conducted by a socially dishonored group that refuses to give up its pride, it expresses the “dream of the personal voice written large. It is [also] a dream that sometimes degenerates into a nightmare” (Meeker 1979:31)

Embroiled in a life of struggle, danger, and aggression on the margins of a system that dishonored and devalued them, Haider and Saleem recognized the reality facing them and abandoned themselves to it. Their conflict with each other opened up fascinating possibilities of a political life on the margins and fired their imaginations. Yet, no hierarchy emerged from the exchanges over matters of turf, supply, crew, and respect between Haider and Saleem; none, perhaps, was intended.

In the sense of instrumental and material benefits that one might realistically expect to amass from such a dispute (giving the struggle a pragmatic aspect), neither man ultimately won much, although there certainly were some material rewards to be had.
Haider’s was eventually a short and pyrrhic victory, at least by some conventional standard of what winning might mean and what might follow in the wake of victory. He was in prison soon after, and Saleem had to stop working on the corner because of other threats to his life.

And still, there was a winner to choose. This winner was Haider, both in the sense of being ascendant before his fall, and in terms of where he ended up after his fall. While Saleem showed signs of “settling down,” trying to participate in legal occupations, Haider remained defiantly wedded to his self-conception as a real man on the street. Saleem’s attempts at legal careers and Haider’s incarceration might mean that Haider still won: he became one of the “lost ones” again, and in the brief time he was back out on the street he had consolidated the portrait of himself as the “realest nigger,” to which the return to prison added the final flourish. By the local bases of evaluation in the street corner society at the margins, Haider’s abandonment of his self to aggression and its possibilities (which included incarceration) enhanced the aura around his name, even as he languished in prison.

Haider’s name “rang out” sporadically on the street in his absence, testifying to the social value and validation of his pursuit. It was not a completely narcissistic, vain struggle that only he recognized. At the same time, the struggle he waged with Saleem and the conception of honor-as-precedence that motivated it was not a heroic one. It was not informed by a wider normative conception of right and wrong, and he was not seeking to fulfill a narrative of the man who used his strengths to achieve ends that were

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28 Please see chapter 5 for the way in which Haider was locally seen as the realest man, a view even more widely accepted upon his imprisonment.
universally socially valuated as noble. There was the street, and there was the possibility for precedence that he and others recognized and strove for.

Indeed, the man of honor is often (and often must be) the “lost one,” the black body taken out of circulation from the street by the state. The lost ones are the imprisoned, swept up in the punitive regime that shreds the social and economic fabric of the urban community and manages this destruction through mass incarceration of black bodies, creating a vicious-virtuous cycle of the accumulation of various capitals. In this manner—and this is the monstrosity—these men and their struggles for glory serve the ends of the system.

This is a life on the periphery (but not the margins) of a society redolent with images of hedonistic self-affirming consumption promised to everyone. Power is promised but always slips away, leaving the street corner to perpetually reconstitute itself in the wake of those swept away by the state or internecine violence. So this “surrogate social system” falls prey to its “in-built tendency to self destruction” (Black-Michaud 1975:160). What remains are the street and the game--perpetual fascinations that perpetuate the difficult-yet-somehow-glorious aspirations of men. In the process of winning and losing these struggles, they burn themselves at the altar of the system that exterminates liminally integrated black bodies, or manages them through punitive institutionalization via the criminal justice system. In the process, victorious black men such as Haider serve the accumulation of a variety of capitals.

29 The use of “virtuous” is ironic here. It refers to a language of profit that is enshrined in capitalist businesses. And indeed, the circle of street-prison-street is very lucrative for politicians and the prison industry.
The idea of using “glory” rather than “honor” emerged in the iterative process of writing this chapter. It is not theorized in great detail. I am also aware of the problematic connotations attached with a different variant—glorification—as it is associated with certain aspects of cultural productions such as hip hop. However, I trust it is apparent from the text that I am not glorifying the struggles or the conflict of Saleem and Haider, merely noting that there was a glorious aspect to their conflict, and the imaginative possibilities it seemed to offer them.

Central Concepts

This section contains a discussion of several concepts that have informed this work. They include the following: (1) Financialization; (2) Paranoia, a local, “native” category, which feeds into (3) what I call “malevolence without provenance”; (4) cruel optimism; (5) deferral and suspension, a sub-concept to cruel optimism; and (6) honor, and as it emerged in the process of writing, the idea of glory. These concepts are interwoven in the chapters that follow, and to some extent in the discussion here as well, which also includes an extended review.

Financialization, again

A brief restatement of what financialization might mean. Note that this does not aim to exhaust the foregoing account of the financial crisis or the historical processes leading up to it.

Financialization is a process of the separation of the “real” economy of production from that of financial investment and speculation, concomitant with the dominance of the latter. It is not just as an economic process, but a modality of the economy that permeates
social life in a manner that is opaque and largely incomprehensible, such that the gyrations of financial markets are felt as upheavals without a clear source and lacking outcomes that can be guarded against subjectively. A process that causes insecurity to those invested in financial markets and a smug but nervous apprehension from those excluded.\footnote{I say more about this anxiety in the conclusion to this dissertation.} Financialization forms the constant backdrop to the phenomena and narratives of this dissertation.

**Paranoia**

Although the concept of “paranoia” rests primarily in the realm of psychology and psychoanalysis, I do not use paranoia to describe a pathological condition. Rather, conjoined with aggression, it refers to the nature of the disposition that is required to live a life on the street with limited means and with few prospects, subsisting under the perennial threat of state violence and the quotidian violence of the street, whether over economic activities or in conflicts arising out of momentary antagonisms in the daily intercourse of people. Given this attenuation of reciprocal sociality, Otis and those in his circle approach social exchanges with mistrust and suspicion. Convinced about the evil of the system they live in, members of the COS see a hidden interest behind everything. Because they have had the “revelation,” they know what this hidden interest is—it is the “bosses,” the fascists, and capitalism itself.

Distrust of reality is an appropriate approach to a system that has historically proven malicious and disempowering. To not believe what the eyes show is not a sign of any delusion in an urban place of color: it is the most sensible view to take until events confirm they indeed are what they purport to be, or turn out otherwise, as they often do.
The experiences of my interlocutors “emphasize the utility of a certain cynical paranoia vis-à-vis American society” (John L. Jackson 2015:88). As will be seen below in the discussion of the occult and conspiratorial narratives, my interlocutors taught me that it is better to believe that nothing occurs “simply by chance or due to the disinterested contingencies of history” (88). Rejecting the strangely unscientific category of chance, they seek explanations for precisely why things happen when they do.

Rather, this is “paranoia within reason” (Marcus 1999). As many scholars have noted about people living in punitive situations, the targets of “discourses of suspicion and punishment, i.e., the object of paranoia… [create] paranoiac narratives of their own” (Humphrey 2003:176).31 The hybrid narratives created to explain everything, that some may call “stigmatized knowledge” (Barkun 2013:3; also see Ch. 2) and the beliefs informing them, provide a bulwark against disorientation and despair. Does this levee hold?

In this place, a tale of conspiracy that recommends vigilance, embodied alertness and tension, and an outlook of impending doom—one that seeks to explain a reality of misfortune, risk and struggle—is not simply a right wing or libertarian political view, or a fringe symptom of anomie. We ignore or dismiss this contemporary reality perhaps at little cost to ourselves, but it is certainly time to either put aside “conspiracy theory” as a pejorative term, or, given its pervasive and mainstream presence, think carefully about what it means for U.S. society as a whole.

31 The fact that theories of conspiracy abound among the historically marginalized “racial” group in the United States testifies to this (Coombe 1997; Goertzel 1994; Klonoff and Landrine 1999; Parsons et al. 1999; Pidgen 1993; Pipes 1992, 1996; Sasson 1995; Simmons and Parsons 2005; Thomas and Quinn 1991; Turner 1993; Waters 1997; Webb 1999).
Conspiracy Theories as Recessionist Americana

Throughout the history of United States, the idea of evil forces behind the scenes that are pushing the good towards a dire end has been a staple of the imagination. The millenarian idea of an end time where mankind would reach a resolution of issues material or spiritual has found fertile ground in a land “settled” in the name of religious freedom. Conspiracy theory finds purchase among those who are unconvinced by extant explanations of the state of the world, or perceive a threat to an idealized social order. Dissatisfied with systemic explanations, or accounts that provide benign understandings of unfortunate events, conspiracy theories appeal to a binary division of the world into good and evil, simultaneously harbingering total battles towards the final outcome (Stewart and Harding 1999) and disparaging the slow movement of reform and social change. They cut through the complexity of life and its discontents, offering a clarity that comes at the easy expense of the complexity that a scholar might appreciate, also a complexity with which a person who has prospered socioeconomically in the system might not feel any need to engage. For instance, a settled member of the middle class who has no cause to question the system because she or he has done well for themselves would scoff at these ideas; but note that even among the middle class, one can easily find persons who believe, for instance, that John F. Kennedy’s death was the outcome of a conspiracy. No longer a fringe phenomenon simply attributed to the “tin-foil hat wearing” eccentric, conspiracy theories today threaten to take over the landscape of the fractured political and public discourse in the United States (Hofstadter 1996 [1965]; Kay 2011; Knight 2002).

Richard Hofstadter outlined the presence of a “paranoid style” in mainstream political discourse in the United States, and was disparaging of the binary division of the
world into good and evil, the refusal to brook gray areas to political life characteristic of a nation-state built on a very self-conscious and perfectible vision of its destiny. Nonetheless, perfectibility, the affirmation of intentionality is an enduring theme, one that has now proliferated and brought marginal, fringe theories into proximity with those vying for the public’s attention and mandate in mainstream politics. “Apocalyptic readiness” is not merely a concern of fringe rightists or leftists, safely ensconced on the margins; it bleeds into the very mainstream of U.S. politics.

Many scholars and journalistic writers lament the obliteration of a common rationality, an agreement on certain basic coordinates that organize our understanding of the world, such as the scientific discoveries of the last two centuries, including the position of the Earth in relation to the Sun, the law of gravity, and the discovery that the Earth is not flat after all. They are rightfully concerned that an inflexion point has arrived in U.S. public discourse,

a signal that the ordinary rules of rational intellectual inquiry are now treated as optional. It is not unusual for intellectuals and politicians to reject their opponents’ arguments. But it is the mark of an intellectually pathologized society that intellectuals and politicians will reject their opponents’ realities. [Kay 2011:xix-xx]

“Sound like libertarians to me”: This comment, made by a professor of anthropology to whom I had described some of the views that my interlocutors (including

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32 For instance, see the convergence between the fear of a North Korean satellite crippling the North American infrastructure articulated by Ted Cruz in the Republican Presidential Debate on February 6, 2016, an idea that has animated the “preppers” and survivalists at the margins of public consciousness for some time. http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/10/preppers-survivalists-survivalcon-expo-nuclear-bomb-republicans-mormons?INTCMP=sfl accessed February 10, 2016.

Also see Sarah Palin’s invocation of conspiracy on climate change: “There is a predetermined agenda definitely of those who I think are controlling the narrative right now…. to make us think that we can somehow change the weather and how they do that is to grow government and allow the government to have more control over us, our homes, our businesses, our families, our lives, and it’s quite unfortunate because these people must be purposely doing this, right? Because they are smart enough to know better.” http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/15/sarah-palin-bill-nye-climate-change-hustle-film accessed April 15, 2016.
Otis, Demaine, William and others) hold, points to a different approach than the one taken here in response to the growing trend of conspiratorial outlooks, one that has burgeoned with the Internet Revolution and exploded after the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States. The question becomes one of political orientation, or positioning on the spectrum of Left to Right. It is an approach that seeks to identify a few telling beliefs to understand where exactly subscribers to those beliefs stand in terms of their political positioning. Such a viewpoint on the phenomenon of conspiracy theories orients itself by approaching a few of the main conclusions of any conspiracy theory. I think this is a useful way to look at variations in political belief, and assimilates fringe ideas to critical analysis of political trends (see, for instance Bronner 2014). Note again that there is a growing sense that these ideas are at least not as peripheral as they used to be; they may even be informing the viewpoints of those who do not fully subscribe to them. Further, it is important to recognize here that the Left, so called, is not immune to or insulated from a conspiratorial outlook. Scholars have assimilated Noam Chomsky and even the “anti-globalization” protesters against the WTO in Seattle to such a viewpoint (Spark 2000).

Factually, it is easy for me to state now, physically (if not emotionally) removed from fieldwork, that I subscribe to the theory of gravity. In fact, I must affirm that this is not in the realm of “optional views” as far as I am concerned. I also do not have any doubt that the Earth is round, or that it revolves around the Sun. I also, in this study, do not wish to engage in an exercise of going through facts about the physical world (facts without quotations marks around them), ticking one after the other as incontrovertible until we reach a point where I am not so sure. “Gravity? Yes. Chem trails? Hmm, I don’t
know. Global warming?\textsuperscript{33} Yes. Weather machines brought the Superstorm Sandy? Hmm, maybe.” Evaluating the empirical veracity of the elements that comprise a conspiracy theory risks missing the point entirely.

My concern is not with the idea of conspiracy qua conspiracy, or with conspiracy as an indicator of political orientation. Further, I am not certain I can adopt a purely “rationalist” view, one that evaluates conspiratorial statements by a specific standard of rationality (such as that taken by Richard Hofstadter, and implied by those who would skip over these fanciful notions about “chem trails” and weather machines to concentrate on the question of political orientation).\textsuperscript{34} Apart from being disrespectful to my interlocutors, it is also because my interpretation is not directed towards the political mainstream, but attempts to stay faithful to what my interlocutors said and derive the significance of what it may mean for them. Not conspiracy qua conspiracy then, but conspiracy as a creative and innovative narrative fashioned not by political elites but by those seeking to explain why they are dispossessed, struggling, threatened with violence from others and from the state. In attempting to understand this pervasive experience of threat, I pay attention to the structure of this suspicious and productive discourse.

\textsuperscript{33} This example is chosen advisedly. The ongoing, tortured, and rather mainstream debate about global warming, in the face of a majority of the scientific community finding clear evidence of the reality of the phenomenon should immediately alert us to the fact that this line between accepted scientific explanations and those that are considered up for debate is being blurred. Without claiming that science is value free and disinterested, I still find the idea that global warming is not really true absurd. It is a fact however, that there are many people who disagree. In the era of proliferating information, we have reached a stage that even an accredited scientist, given the right incentives, can opine that we do not yet have enough data to reach a conclusion. This is the gift of the information age to us, an always available choice of uncertainty or denial. The experts do not know, and everyone is now an expert because they can “google” it.

\textsuperscript{34} The latter have a curious reaction: they first smile at the particulars, and then soberly move on to the substantive task of tagging and categorizing individuals and groups in terms of political orientation indicated by the nature of the conspiracy theory they espouse. This first gesture, a smiling dismissal of the particulars, has been ubiquitous in my interactions. Interestingly, it is the same when I outline the earnest agenda of the COS.
Traditions of non-positivist forms of rationality offer some comparative resources for such an interpretation.

**An Interpretation of Malevolence without Provenance**

How does a young black man perceive and explain his disenfranchisement in an ostensibly egalitarian society? What forms of relationships does he create between experience and event, social position and promise? How does such a man articulate and affirm himself with the resources available to him? How does he square his individual situation with the promise he was given in the “Land of the Free,” dedicated to the pursuit of happiness when all around him he sees un-freedom and un-happiness? What “coherent ideology of daily living” (Fortes 1953:18) must he subscribe to—what cluster of basic ideas about causation, rules of behavior, and what explanation of the world? What happens when he hears rumblings of a crisis in the state that he is part of, a cataclysm in a financialized economy at the periphery of which he offers whatever surplus can be extracted from his body and his work as he lives? In what floating signifier must he invest the proliferating surplus of meaning so he might find truth if not justice, (temporary) relief if not happiness? What effect is produced from a daily experience of fear and threat? Like a permanently running fever that surges and wanes, what do the stories of Otis have to do with the phenomenal perception of threats coming from all directions, of being subject to a state of siege, in a perennial state of emergency (Taussig 1989)?

Chapter 2 delves into the idea that these tales of conspiracy and inevitable catastrophe refer to a force that is beyond the political and the social, a power that is
apprehended ambivalently. This approach is informed by anthropological studies of the occult.

**Structural Change**

Ethnographic explorations of witchcraft have emphasized the resurgence of witchcraft and sorcery accusations and incidents at times of cataclysmic social change, be it the fragmentation of traditional systems through colonization, the breakdown of colonial order, and the neocolonial and paternalistic imposition of formal instruments of “western democracy” and “modernization” in nation-states ravaged by the same exploitative and violent colonial regimes.35

Throughout the 1990s, countries struggling with balance of payment situations around the world were compelled into Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) destructive of local economies. This neoliberalization of their economies and state governance structures produced instability and chaos, while promising a dazzling world of wealth and commodities. Almost universally, the experience has been one of increased GDP but stark polarization of wealth and rising poverty. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff produced a penetrating analysis of the “dramatic rise in occult economies” (1999:279) as an engagement with “modernity and its malcontents” (1993:xi-xxxvii), that is, with the disorganization and disorientation caused by new vistas of wealth and dispossession, the arbitrary fortune of some and misfortune of others as neoliberal globalization wrought havoc on national economies.

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35 When the social order is perceived to be under threat, witches emerge, enabling a consensus around, and a reaffirmation of dearly held values. Often, these reaffirmations are tenuous and the structural violence of widespread change results in violence against those suspected to have gotten their wealth through illicit means, directing our attention to the repetitive nature of witchcraft accusations, as well as the political economy of instability that produces them.
A renewed interest amongst anthropologists in the 1990s has been concerned to reassert the rationality of witchcraft practice, as Evans-Pritchard’s masterwork “Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande” had originally done (1937).\(^{36}\)\(^{37}\)

Contemporary discourses of witchcraft proliferate amongst the dispossessed, and the wealthy. Today, scholars attempt to understand witchcraft as a response to neoliberalization and the surge of the global market in African nation-states, as an engagement with, and critique of, the nature and merits of modernity. The disparities of wealth generated by the sudden influx of money and commodities in these nations, it is argued, has contributed to renewed discourses of witchcraft that function both as a means of securing one’s own future against misfortune and economic loss, as well as a moral commentary on the new era of neoliberal capitalist accumulation (Ashforth 2005; Briggs 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2000, 2005 [2001]; Geschiere 1997).\(^{38}\)

Politicians and youth alike lead a resurgence of witchcraft beliefs and practices, the discourse adapting itself to the new reality where some get rich while others remain deprived, there being no clear explanation as to why someone succeeds while another fails.

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36 To get some sense of the kind of exoticization and prejudice about Africans that these scholars were struggling against, see Gluckman 1944.

37 Along with Evans-Pritchard, Clyde Kluckhohn’s study of Navaho witchcraft was among the early works that examined the logic of witchcraft. In spite of some excellent observations about both the anxiety and secrecy in Navaho upbringing that facilitates witchcraft belief, a well-rounded analysis of some social and personal needs served by witchcraft, and the assessment of the strains produced by white settlement, Kluckhohn’s work has not gained as much traction in subsequent research. For other early work on witchcraft, see Douglas 1970; Marwick 1952, 1964, 1970; Middleton and Winter 1963. Early approaches also struggled against Western prejudices, and sought the socially valuable functions of witchcraft. These included proscribing anti social behavior (Gluckman 1956), reaffirming egalitarian distribution of wealth, directing aggression away from the group and kinship structure (Basso 1969, Kluckhohn 1944), serving as a “social strain gauge” (Marwick 1964), releasing social tensions (Turner 1957), maintaining social control (Marwick 1967; Wilson 1951). These approaches were coherent with the functional orientation prevalent in anthropology.

38 And other contexts of change as well; for instance, after the breakdown of the socialist economy, long suppressed shamans returned in communities facing privations in post-socialist Mongolia (Buyandelger 2013).
The concrete practices of witchcraft today address modern phenomena of money making and democratic politics, and partake of the new media of communication. People seek succor in healing services as they suffered under the threat of invisible economic forces, while government leaders seek to reconcile the apparent incompatibility of supposedly modern democratic regimes with the values of knowledge systems that prejudiced Westerners deem to be tinged with “superstition” and “backwardness” (Ashforth 2005). Many recent studies articulate the relation between the occult, power, and state power as the neoliberalizing state becomes implicated in wealth accumulation (Moore and Sanders 2001a:17-18; Moore and Sanders 2001b). The continued vitality of this discourse and practice in societies dealing with the onset and outcomes of neoliberalization commands attention on its own terms. The state enacts its own fears and fantasies in this flux, finding an uncanny power in the “criminal” that it seeks to posses (Siegel 1998). Everyone, irrespective of age, gender or social location becomes the

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39 Another strand of discussions on witchcraft harkens back to its European tradition, and two instances are salient in the North American context. The Salem Witch Trials, widely understood as a moral panic in nascent, puritan EuroAmerican society as it sought to establish itself (but see Erikson 1966), have provided an explanatory trope for the spate of ritual child abuse accusations that appeared in the mid 1980s (Nathan and Snedeker 1995). Apprehensions generated by changes in the economy and the structure of family life, especially the increased entry of women into the workforce and the resultant increase in institutional care of children in sites other than the household, led to a nationwide panic about vulnerability of children. Concerns about the new emerging family and the nascent post-industrial economy in the United States were refracted through this focus on children and day care centers. Specialists ranging from the judges and police of the criminal justice system, social workers, and psychotherapeutic care providers focused attention on this situation through their activities. By the late 1990s, the frenzy generated by so called moral entrepreneurs had largely dissipated (York 2005). Ideas of satanic ritual abuse, dismemberment of children, and recovered memory syndrome, were discredited. A number of convictions were overturned, civil cases were filed against psychotherapists and substantial compensations were paid out in a few cases. The conflation of the ritual abuse scare with the Salem witch trials has been disputed, in the sense that the view of witchcraft as a hysterical reaction that leads to scapegoating and allegation without basis, the cliché of the “witch hunt,” does not cover the complexity of the ritual abuse scare (see Comaroff 1997 and Hacking 1991). However, the view of witchcraft itself has been modified in the interim from this European origin to account for the phenomenon as encountered during and after the colonial encounter. As discussed above in the context of new analyses, witchcraft is viewed as a moral commentary and witchcraft discourses as “local interventions in global histories.” Here, it indexes “perversion processes of extraction and accumulation” (Comaroff 1997:12) on this street corner of RapCity-Sleeptown.
possible source of death, a peril that is not eased despite a spate of killings in the wake of the end of a regime (Siegel 2006).

Scholars have argued that societies encountering neoliberalization and previous incarnations of capitalism respond, in fact, to the sorcery of capitalism, to the fetish of the commodity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1997; Taussig 1980). The structure of witchcraft is a felicitous discourse that explains an equally fantastic reality, equaling the mirages and spectacle of capitalism in its violence and excesses. There is a mutual interplay, not of a retrograde, archaic practice but rather one that is as fruitfully engaged with modernity as modernity is enchanted by it (Comaroff 1997). Rather than seeking definitional fidelity, scholars of witchcraft and sorcery in these modern contexts alert us to the dynamic and versatile nature of these representations and their great facility in adapting to modern changes.

Hence, structural change and the resultant chaos and disorganization are often triggers for a resurgence and proliferation of discourses of the occult, of hidden forces and of malevolent intention. The structural similarity between the narrative of a hidden conspiracy of my interlocutors, and the belief that someone wishes them ill in places where malevolent power is given the name of witchcraft is the situation of upheaval, dispossession, and marginalization. I argue here that the stories of conspiracy in this ethnography similarly offer imaginative resources. They facilitate an aversion and delay of a material and existential crisis that threatens Otis and his followers at every step of their often dread-filled lives, right in the belly of capitalism.

In his study of political relations between the village and the state in Cameroon in the context of widespread change caused by neoliberalization, Peter Geschiere
recognized that his interlocutors maintained an ambivalent relationship to unknown power (1997). I begin with comparing the structural context of the United States with sites such as the one examined by Geschiere, before delving into the specific texture of the discourse that passed between Otis, Demaine, William, Isaac, and others who routinely gathered in an informal circle. For Otis and his friends, being “fallen” (Stewart 1996) in a society that only valued success and deemed failure a personal flaw and moral defect, a suspicion that something is wrong and a feeling of menace and impending doom caused ideas that apparently do not conform to the reason and logic of others to appear all too reasonable and logical. And there is a pleasure too (Stewart 2007), in channeling this power that resists discursive control, remains inassimilable, returning again and again to threaten. It threatens, but Otis engages because this power excites him, this fraction of insight he has into something that he knows affects him.

I follow these openings in locating the structural origins of Otis’s conspiratorial discourse in Chapter 2.\(^{40}\) Concomitant with the ascent of financialization, a steady evisceration of the social safety net and the decline of the welfare state have created extreme disparities in wealth and stagnation in upward mobility in the United States. Furthermore, the transition to a post-industrial financialized society has increased vulnerability and contributed to economic insecurity. To provide a comparison using two examples from earlier generations: Thelonious, now 70 years old, worked for 12 years in a factory and still drew a pension. While he was living very modestly, he had some

\(^{40}\) This power is also illicit, and also menacing. I follow this line as well, in seeing how Otis relates to such power in his discourse, at the level of articulation rather than at the level of structure. Together, this power then performs as a fetish, whose inscription is also the moment of the erasure of that which it signifies. The state does not really become visible as an object of attack in the discourse of Otis, alerting us to Taussig’s analysis of Durkheim and his interpretation of state fetishism (1992b:ch. 7). For more on this, see the conclusion to this dissertation.
security provided by this employment from 40 years ago. Similarly, Stella spent enough
time in the RapCity public school system to draw a stable retirement and secure her
mortgage. Few such opportunities were available by the time Otis came of age. Just like
Thelonious, Otis had a high school education, but his prospects were entirely different.

Beyond structural similarities of economic upheaval and change, it was intriguing
why Otis seemed to enjoy telling these stories of conspiracy and apocalypse. After all, if
he was right about this (and he had no doubt that he was), did it not mean that the
malevolent ‘Powers that Be’ behind the scenes would destroy him? Accordingly, chapter
2 is centrally concerned with the ambivalent relationship to power, to the curious pleasure
Otis seemed to derive as he enunciated a story about a power that will destroy him. It
delves into the idea that witchcraft discourse refers to a force, a power that is beyond the
political and the social.41

Witchcraft begins with words used to express misfortune; it is materialized in
words (Siegel 2006, Favret-Saada 1980). This discursive structure is used to delve into
Otis and others’ speech. What is behind Otis’ words about his accidental position and that
of others like him who are outside the orbit of the powers that be, shut out of the centers
of force that define and control social reality? These discourses were produced in
response to a feeling of menace and doom in a society where such discourse has not had a
socially- and historically-recognized institutionalization (except in Native American
societies, and in response to an upsurge of deviance amongst the puritan “settlers”).42

What is shared between those around the globe who have an idea of the occult and some

41 If the discourse of financialization could have helped understand daily life for Otis, it might have. On a
related note, the COS never reached Otis with the Marxist analysis of class-consciousness they espoused so
earnestly. This dis-encounter is addressed separately.
42 See Eriksen 1966.
such as my interlocutors in the United States is a sense of impending crisis and the emergence of situations that propel a kind of speech (not only in Otis, but also in the COS) that can be treated as a discourse of bewitchment. A form of subaltern experience finds analogs in a crisis-ridden “First World,” and leads, in this interpretation, to a discourse similar in form and structure.

Finally, scholars also noted that witchcraft accusations and deliberations served only temporarily to create harmony in the individual disposition and in society. While it may reduce strain, the deflection of a social disturbance from a malfunctioning social institution on to specific individuals produces stressors of its own. Such deflection does not contribute to change or repair in those malfunctioning institutions; they remain liable to malfunction again, pointing to witchcraft as an outcome of institutional failure (Nadel 1952:28-29). The social efficacy of witchcraft remains doubtful and tenuous (or temporary), and witchcraft itself creates further tensions. In this, it reflects the conflicts and fissures immanent in the social order.

**The Logic of a Threatened Discourse**

Consider this fieldnote extract after an evening spent with Otis, a few years after the financial crisis happened in Wall Street and radiated outward, and as the economy stagnated and people lost lifetimes of work and ongoing means of subsistence:

All the while, as the precarity and privations of one’s own social position appear inexplicable, threats multiply. Police sirens and the potential for conflicts with each other breed a permanent state of tense vigilance. Otis and his fellows, brave young Americans who are trying to survive and thrive, fashion the narrative of a conspiracy that is designed towards their ultimate destruction. From out of nowhere, one day the powers that be will begin the culling. They will kill us all and secure this earth for themselves. We are slaves, already and again, bodies sold at birth without our knowledge. The preparation has been underway for a long time, in front of our eyes if only we would see through this reality, this mask that has been
pulled over our eyes. We are drugged, poisoned and weakened through this daily life itself. Serving both as a moral commentary on contemporary U.S. society, as well as an explanation for a reality whose coordinates make no sense, Otis’s discourse draws others in a loose orbit around him. He fashions fantastic stories and through them dominates, giving the group a system. It is a grand, terrible vision of the eventual apocalypse, the destruction of the world.

Is this so irrational? Is this a truly inaccurate, mistaken, and flawed description of what some people expect might happen to them? Is this not what happens to them? Is it that they cannot see the role of violence and incarceration in terms of financialization?

The suspicions of Otis and friends, and the stories that Otis supplied to confirm these suspicions and give them a structure, were based on a palpable sense of discontent with their current situation, and a premonition that things will not work out well. They all live in America, the land of great promise and happiness, but the odds seemed stacked against them. There seemed no clear line between their experience and some explanations we might suggest (the history of slavery, racism, social exclusion of neighborhoods, mass incarceration, financialization). The system that produced their situation could be felt, but not known. Otis offered coherence, a story, an explanation of sorts; and the others filled in their own confirmatory ideas: Demaine heard that a state sponsored blackout was imminent, William had seen a UFO when he was a kid, and was now transporting truckloads of ordinance to the border, Rick had discovered that Hitler was a Jew. It was all connected, it all seemed to come together somehow, to hang together, to make sense. In addition to being a partial answer to their troubles, it had the character of a dramatic story (Kluckhohn 1962 [1944]).

43 See Lévi-Strauss 1963 for a discussion of the value offered by a coherent system, and the investment in the confirmation of the truth of this system over notions of justice, coherence, or complete knowledge.
There was a pattern of repeated misfortune in the lives of Otis, Demaine and many others. A conspiratorial explanation, of the frustrations and powerlessness they experience, the opaque nature of the world before them, satisfied the need for origins and causes of their misfortune (Favret-Saada 1980). At the same time, it is crucial to recognize that Otis could command attention and dominate the situation in these evenings where we congregated, because first and foremost he brought into words something that many others suspected. It was expression more than explanation that was the source of his status in these moments. There is a rationality, or a truth to this, one that we must acknowledge if not affirm, not pathologize if not accept.44

Witchcraft—in the strictest sense—is absent, but its structure, its form of explanation, its emergence from fear and its repeated success and failure in resolving existential tensions obtains on this street corner in the United States. The idiom of witchcraft obtains with or without its rituals in this setting. Other comparisons have treated witchcraft as a phenomenon that resonates with other situations that induce panic and a loss of orientation (Comaroff 1997), the personages involved in it (Geschiere 2003), or as something from without, a force, something that points to a gap in discourse (Morris 2008).

It is important to state here that I am not positing some kind of hallucinatory irrationality in the beliefs of Otis and others which pointed me to ideas of the occult. It is more about the structure of meaningfulness that emerges out of their tale of conspiracy, and the feeling of threat they perceive from unknown forces that are in turn named or personified amorphously as the ‘Powers that be’, as the third person plural “They.” In

44 I am at pains to avoid any negative and discriminatory connotations that might flow from a facile reading of this interpretation.
general, insecurity in uncertain times breeds spiritual (or even existential) vulnerability, and hidden forces seem to be at work, conspiring in ways unseen against the individual.

One might still argue that this is a constitutive flaw of conspiratorial theories, such “magical interpretations of material realities” (Moore and Sanders 2001a) and that, for instance, a class-consciousness argument might better help understand (and explain) why one is in poverty, how one’s relation to the means of production places them in a difficult situation in a capitalist society. Indeed, the members of the COS do seek to give this kind of explanation, a revelatory (and hopefully revolutionary) spark to those who would listen.\(^{45}\) Marxist theorizations would consider an explanation pointing to hidden forces to be a form of false consciousness.\(^{46}\) For one, see my introductory observations about “explanations” and the rather different objectives of this dissertation. For another, this class analysis seems to lack the dramatic register of a conspiracy to kill us all.\(^{47}\) Furthermore, even Marx noted the fantastic nature of the commodity fetish, where relations between persons appear as relations between things. The choice is not clear cut between mystery and mystification, conscious belief in unseen forces and false consciousness.

Nonetheless, we have an instance of this counter-view within the empirical confines of this study itself: the members of the COS do indeed seek to give this kind of explanation, a revelatory (and hopefully revolutionary) spark to those who would listen.\(^{45}\) Marxist theorizations would consider an explanation pointing to hidden forces to be a form of false consciousness.\(^{46}\) For one, see my introductory observations about “explanations” and the rather different objectives of this dissertation. For another, this class analysis seems to lack the dramatic register of a conspiracy to kill us all.\(^{47}\) Furthermore, even Marx noted the fantastic nature of the commodity fetish, where relations between persons appear as relations between things. The choice is not clear cut between mystery and mystification, conscious belief in unseen forces and false consciousness.

\(^{45}\) See chapter 4.

\(^{46}\) Frederic Jameson refers to a conspiratorial view as “poor person’s cognitive mapping,” while Stephen Bronner in his analysis of bigotry speaks of “conspiracy fetishism” (Bronner 2014; Jameson 1988; Lizardo 2009; Mason 2002).

\(^{47}\) That a need for the dramatic may be an important element of mobilizational strategy and discourse might in turn also shed light on the sensationalized nature of COS’s claims about impending World War III, or the nature of some of their reporting, for instance the article on teachers potentially becoming victims of child abuse in a capitalist state, discussed in Chapter 4. Separately, the idea that potential and actual comrades will be subject to persecution can also be read in the register of a “witch hunt,” which in the modern secular setting of the United States is often used to refer to an agenda-driven attack on specific persons or collectives.
answer to those who would listen. Telegraphically to relate the COS in their non-relation
to Otis and his fellows, the COS would tell Otis that his conspiratorial explanation points
to a false consciousness and the correct understanding is the COS view. This view is
available, roughly 50 meters from where Otis stands and works everyday. 48 However, for
the carriers of that explanation such as Stella, Roger, and many others who are in the
COS, reality has become not the experience of the encounter, but that of dis-encounter.
Stella and Otis never meet. 49

In any case, Marx doesn’t offer to Otis the pleasure that his self-fashioned, hybrid
and free-floating links of conspiracy do. 50 To seek the pleasure, excitement, and
fascination of an apocalyptic narrative that creatively combines fragments of facts,
phenomena, and experiences, I followed Otis sincerely, and sought to understand what he
pointed to in what I call his “threatened discourse,” one that seems fascinated and fearful
in equal measure in its relation to a remote, opaque, inadequately named and vaguely
personified power.

Returning from the path he led me, two concepts stood out as possible interpretive
keys for an anthropological and political analysis. One is the fearsome nature of
witchcraft and its effect on persons in other societies (Cannon 1942). The other is the
view of the nature of the state, as experienced by those who are subject to its monopoly

48 Note my observation above that master terms such as financialization, neoliberalism, and so on were not
absent from the discourse of my interlocutors. Stella and the COS speak the language of class conflict, of
racism and war for capitalist superexploitation, of bosses and workers. Yet, their own experience creates
self-doubt and a fear of betrayal.
49 also recall the observations relating to Chapter 1 about the invisible divide between these two places that
are physically conjugated with each other
50 Kathleen Stewart observes that there is a pleasure in conspiracy (2007). And Lévi-Strauss observed how
the Zuni boy became more and more excited as he told the story that would prove he was a witch,
condemning himself to death. He gave the chiefs and the people of the village access to a truth of which
they possessed only a fragment, became increasingly radiant in the presence of this power (1963; also see
Siegel 2006:ch. 1).
of violence. In either instance, Otis’s view of “reality as masked and inherently deceptive” is borne out (Taussig 1992b:113). The state is not the guarantor of his safety, much less of his well-being. His well-being is not the concern of the state, as the prevalent anti-welfare and individualistic rhetoric of neoliberal governance would have it. Otis’s failures at economic success are his own, due to some deficiency in him. He is black after all, and that confirms it; it must be him. And his safety, rather than being guaranteed by the state, is everyday imperiled by the state because it does not sanction what he does for subsistence. He is the subject of the criminal justice system. As it provides a sense of security to us, the same state turns its monopolized violence on him. And Otis is not alone. Young black men who gravitate around him share this dual experience of “personal failure” and punitive condemnation. In turn, the power of the story of hidden forces that Otis marshals for himself and those around him aids him in creating a narrative that works through him. This ambivalent fascination, with a power that excites him at the same time as he tells how it will destroy us all, resonates with the experiences of those in other places who seek through the discourses of the occult to relate to possibilities of wealth and status at the same time as they attempt to articulate their dispossession and marginality in a form that will provide some purchase on a reality that has become all too confused and inexplicable.

And still one could ask, does this satisfaction of expressing bring peace, did it bring lasting relief? To anticipate the conclusions of Chapter 2, the articulation of this story around their suspicions did not bring lasting relief from the menace and tension of

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51 To be clear, I am being ironic here. Further, it is not as if Otis, Demaine, William and others are unaware of these stigmas, these wider perceptions that attach to their skin. In this regard, see Reik 1941 on aggression that stems from anticipation of an expected future event (a generalized sense of “what they will think of me because I am black” in this case) may lead a person to identify with the anticipated aggressor, and in turn respond with aggression directed towards the outside world.
their daily lives for Otis, William, Demaine, Isaac and many others who moved in and out of this circle, adding their own experiences and findings of hidden truths and receiving those of others. Something unknowable still pressed for expression; articulation of this unknown into a story of conspiracy did not exhaust the possibility of understanding, even though it satisfied the need for expression. A nebulous pressure compelled speech because it threatened absolute silence, death. In a life which is threatened everyday, something indefinable found expression in the story of a conspiracy; yet this speech did not grasp it definitively, did not bring it into articulation in a form that was available for judgment or action. It could not be spoken and yet was. Speech could not contain experience and the pressure built again, pressing for expression. The sense of menace never eased long enough.

Further, a political consciousness as conventionally understood (and I would add, hoped for by those doing the conceiving), in the sense of resistance, a truth-to-power, does not emerge from this critical outlook. It is a critical outlook nonetheless, an intervention into reality that does not accept it as given but instead radically deconstructs it even at the risk of throwing the self into crisis. No stable group emerges around men like Otis (pace the “misfiring of the system” as William gets baptized and Demaine withdraws) or Haider (see chapter 5) in this corner of financialized, mass incarcerating U.S. In both Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, we are talking about the failure of an enduring group, of a community of understanding to emerge. On one side, Otis’s system misfires,

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52 Ideas of a conspiracy are generally difficult to verify, if not impossible. For instance, the “flat earth” thesis that gave Otis so much manic pleasure, was not so much a verifiable idea, as it was itself a proof of something else. It confirmed the presence of the “powers that be” without explaining anything. It is to this extent that I return to arguments of those that seek to categorize conspiracy theories in terms of political belief, but from the opposite angle. There is a persistent non-recognition (or disparagement) of certain experiences in the U.S., which leads to the increasingly popular discourse of conspiracy, one that is largely un-actionable by its own proponents but persists nonetheless.
and on the other, no system is ever meant to emerge out of Haider’s moments of glory, which include his return to jail. In a response to “financialization” and civil marginalization different from Otis, Haider is only winning to become the lost one, lost to his family and the street as he fills the number of bodies required for the prison to flourish. Like Otis, the state threatens Haider with violence everyday. And the general social portrayal of someone like Haider is a “transparent recognition” of his criminality, and in turn of him as an object of revulsion and stigma, of threat. What else is mass incarceration but an institution built on fear, which in turn contributes to this fear? One might say that Haider’s apprehension of the system is less esoteric, more “political,” than that of Otis.54

From the experience of Otis and his fellows on one side, I turn to the alienated petit bourgeoisie of the COS on the other. For Otis, as for Demaine and many others like them, society and the state do not offer a reflection in which they can see themselves reflected adequately, or at all. On the other hand, the COS’s rejection of their sociopolitical context, their rejection of their social world, is volitional.

There are convergences between the middle class radicals of the COS and young black men I encountered in RapCity. The COS is utopian and hopes for the next global conflict, a World War III after which they will lead the revolution. On the other hand, the men we encounter in Chapter 2 predict and fear apocalypse and think of preparing to protect against it and be ready for life in the post apocalyptic waste. One thinks of a collective revolution in the wake of the apocalypse, while the others think of surviving in

53 For more on the idea of being transparently recognized as a criminal for black men (and the aporias that issue from having to defeat this prejudicial impression before even being admitted to social discourse in a way one could accept), see the work of Lisa Marie Cacho (2012).
54 Please see the Conclusion for further discussion of this theme.
a post-apocalypse world. For the COS, the apocalypse is produced by capitalism, the system that will eat itself. For the conspiracy theorists of the street, the apocalypse is man made, planned by the powers that be to annihilate 95% of the world’s population, planned by “them” to eat “us.” They seem to find a “magical solution” to the gap between revolutionary goal and concrete reality (Varon 2004:56). How does this work? The COS believes that getting their newspaper, “The Clash,” to as many people as possible would spark the revolution.

In different ways, both groups are marginal to the mainstream, although COS members of the original generation generally have stable mainstream livelihoods and incomes. The young black men lack economic agency, while the COS lacks political agency. Akin to the men on the street, members of the COS have a suspicious engagement with mainstream society and polity. For the men on the street, surveillance is ever present yet they feel invisible to the state and its public, only appearing as a periodic flash in the news and other media as the fear-inducing persona of the “black male.” Held over from a different era, COS members’ distrust fits well into the new age of surveillance and reinforces their hatred of the state and bosses. While there are occasional hints of a conspiratorial view, members of the COS generally take recourse to the certainty of class analysis to explain current events and the nature of the world. Unlike the men on the street, however, COS members seem to draw sustainable benefit from the sociality within the group, a safe space where they can communicate without suspicion.

**Cruel Optimism**

In her book “Cruel Optimism,” Laurent Berlant embarks on a search for “conditions under which certain attachments to what counts as life come to make sense or
no longer make sense, yet remain powerful as they work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings” (2011:13). Cruel optimism refers to forms of attachment that hurt as they offer hope, leaving the subject in a suspended oscillation between, say, expectation and anticipation on the one hand and gloom, angst and melancholy on the other (but crucially, not just between such binaries, and not necessarily in a relation organized temporally). The metaphor of suspension is critical here—cruel optimisms are not movements, which imply anticipation and a future orientation. They are also not loaded with value, because that is the work of the affective and emotional manifestations that may (or may not) flow out of attachment, which is itself only a “structure of relationality” (13; emphasis in original).  

Taking a political approach towards affect, and a cultural approach to politics, Berlant seeks to relate minute moments of cultural productions to a larger political reality that generally seems attenuated, dessicated, and stagnating in a flux that only confirms repetitive contingency and disempowerment. Although it is clear that Berlant is on the side of the disempowered, the concept of cruel optimism is developed ‘dispassionately’, in the sense that it is not loaded with a transcendental value or a teleology of hope.  

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55 This detemporalized and “un-emotional” view on attachment emerges from a theory of affect which is best defined in the negative to begin with—it is not psychoanalytic, in that it does not emerge out of a theory of the unconscious; it is not political economic, in that it does not seek in historical reality the morphological “problem” that prevents the achievement of a transcendental ideal, or identify an infrastructural motor that defines and moves (or retards) history; affect is not a humanist or human-centered theory, and asserts the “fundamental heterogeneity” (Guattari 1996:159) of any process of forming the unformed and constantly fragmenting subject; affect is also not emotion according to certain views (Berlant takes a more ambivalent position here), but something prior to it or, at least, not emerging from the same theory of desire (in fact, it might be claimed that certain strands of affect theory generally avoid any theory of desire). Affect is also considered pre-language, in the sense that whether an energy, intensity, or a vitality, it does not center itself in a speaking human subject, and neither does it simply develop into something else in the human subject.  

56 For a similarly dispassionate consideration of the category of hope, with different premises and different conclusions but a similar refusal to outline a teleology, see Crapanzano (2003).
Cruel optimism resonates with the story of Stella, a remarkable woman who is the protagonist of chapter 3, and in generality with her collective the COS (chapter 4). After some early childhood experiences of loss, Stella’s life has been driven by her steadfast commitment to the goal of an Internationalist revolution. She joined a collective called the COS in the 1960s, the decade of student unrest, struggles for social justice, and widespread protests against the status quo in the U.S. The COS was active and vital, and achieved some remarkable “exemplary actions” in their pursuit of a revolutionary change in capitalist society. However, over that decade and the next, there was a slow but sure dissipation of upheaval and revolutionary fervor across the globe. The possibility of systemic change slowly receded, but many activists continued to work in the service of their ideals. Stella was one such person, unwavering in her commitment to revolution and her devotion to the COS. She married within the COS, followed the leadership’s directive in her choice of occupation, and mobilized around the sale or distribution of The Clash, the bi-weekly newspaper produced by the COS. Even the loss of an adopted child and the end of her marriage did not dissuade Stella from her work. Today, she continues the revolutionary struggle by raising social issues at her church, teaching English to Spanish speaking immigrants, following up diligently on cases of potential deportation of undocumented individuals, and helping those that come into contact with her.

Cruel optimism indicates a relation to something whose possibility of becoming concrete, of becoming part of experience, is already known to be either impossible or so problematic that it might well not come into being. And yet, the continued relation to it (an object, an idea, a social value, a utopia) has become essential and integral to a subject’s sense of what the continuous flow of life might imply (Berlant 2008:33). This is
the cruelty of the dialectic of the structure of such a relation. Unlike melancholia, there is not a temporal structure (and the failure thereof) to this relation. Between wanting and having stands the subject, where wanting allows the continuity of life while having might threaten everything. Life then, becomes the activity of maintaining this position in between, rather than the activity of movement from wanting to having. It is a cruel suspension that demands activity, but, as the reader will see for Stella, this activity must be predicated on a deferral.

While the global situation has become more complex since the decline of industrial capitalism in the U.S. and the emergence of the post-Fordist paradigm characterized by the dominance of finance, the COS continues to view the world political situation as one of a class conflict between “bosses” and “workers” in each nation, and global maneuvering for ascendancy by the major superpowers. New terms of analysis and explanation such as “financialization” and “neoliberalism” have not yet found any purchase in the COS analysis, that still relies on conflicts over energy, between global superpowers, and ultimately between two classes as the central engine, the motor force of history.

57 In general, there is much that resonates here with psychoanalysis: the projection of a desire, the search for an object, or, having found it, the frustrated attempts at cathexis. There is a crucial difference, arising from a certain atemporality that is indicated in the specific idea of cruel optimism but is also generally claimed in theories of affect that do not deny the moment to moment movement of time, but refuse acceding to a linear conception of temporality which brings in its wake a structure of beginnings, middles, ends and leads rapidly to a slide into teleologies or notions of a transcendental objective that stands apart from and over the subject. The subject itself has already become human, relegating all non human vitalities and intensities to the status, at best, of objects.

Further, there is behind the idea of cruel optimism as the structure of a relation of attachment a rhetorical intent, not a psychoanalytic one. Finally, Berlant’s analysis is predicated on the view that “psychoanalytically speaking all intersubjectivity is impossible” (2008:35). This view, in my understanding, takes the idea of a lack or absence at the core of the person to its logical conclusion. In my own approach to this negativity here, this might be a logical conclusion, but nonetheless intersubjective encounters allow something to be experienced (even if it is simply this impossibility) and thus allow for something to be said. This negativity, even if it continually reasserts itself, presses for expression.
Berlant develops her concept through rumination on “the strange temporalities of projection into an enabling object that is also disabling” (34). I focus here on Berlant’s observations on Barbara Johnson’s discussion of “a silent, affectively present but physically displaced interlocutor… [an unspoken conversation with whom can take place in] a fake present moment of intersubjectivity” (34). This moment is only possible if it is “fake,” as it were, if the spoken is not heard. I want to develop this point in relation to the informal meeting on an anti-racism pamphlet with Stella, David (another COS member), and Ena, an African American lawyer. In this meeting, the “performance of address” (34) that the COS creates is made impossible because Ena is present (I do not mean simply physically, although that is integral to the situation here). She speaks, and is met with silence, her speech making impossible the possibility of Stella, David, and the COS’s anti-racism to be ‘unspoken and unheard.’

Stella’s own life has been materially secure, and she weathered the financial crisis and Great Recession without serious consequence. Her most intimate relation with her husband Doug, however, came to an end during the course of my research. Doug is an artist, an individualist who briefly joined the COS but did not stay. He does not believe that the revolution, or the Third World War that COS predicts will pave the way for a global revolution (led by the COS), is imminent. Interestingly, a trip to India brought simmering differences to a boil and while they attempted reconciliation through dialogue and therapy, the relationship did not survive.

58 The word “fake” is problematic because of its connotations of inauthenticity, duplicity, or insincerity. I do not want to indicate any connotation of ‘bad faith’ on the part of the COS and its members. Rather, here the use of ‘fake’ as I understand it is to convey the possibility of a dialogue that can only happen with absence (of the recipient) and silence as its constitutive conditions.
Stella remained optimistic following her separation from Doug, affirming that she was loveable, and acknowledging to herself this accession to the bourgeois institution of marriage. “I am the marrying kind,” she said. She also consoled herself with things that had endured in her life, even though her love was now unrequited: her writing, her work, her friends, and the attachment to and hope for a revolution.

Cruel optimism characterizes the relations of attachment people continue to maintain notwithstanding the fact that the objective conditions of possibility for such attachments may have receded from view. For most residents of the global North, these attachments are to imaginations of a good life, one that provides material success, upward mobility, and emotional satisfaction. In the 1960s, Marxism offered an analysis and praxis that fired the imagination and gave hope for positive, total, social change. At the height of the fervor for change and the expectation of actual change during the middle of the twentieth century, COS’s ideology as a teleological path that drove towards the good object that is communism fired Stella’s passion. It also aided her in holding at bay other bad objects of her personal life, as a commitment to a cause greater than oneself must do; it is one of the reasons for a persistent commitment.59

For members of COS like Stella, alienated as they are from liberal capitalist economy and society, the attachment to an idea of utopia, to revolution and utopian society as an object that is “not-yet-become” (Bloch 1986) persists.60 Nearly half a century on and in the wake of Reagan and Thatcher and what their regimes signified for

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59 For a psychoanalytic view, on the idea of good objects and their relation to the internal world of the subject, see Klein (1975:306-343).

60 In a generalized way, I suspect Ernst Bloch’s observations on hope, and his concept of not-yet-become runs as an undercurrent, or a bridge between Berlant’s discussion and the COS. This is simply an intuition based on my belief (or hope?) that Berlant is not as dispassionate as she seeks to be, and a different version of the COS’s vision might just come to pass one day.
the U.S. and U.K. and many parts of Europe, as capitalist market rationality holds sway and permeates deeper into every aspect of economic and social life, what is the relation to this ideal today?

I argue that difficulties in coming to terms with, so she could mourn the passing of her son, and the steadfast attachment to a revolution that does not arrive, are of a piece in the life of Stella. As Berlant suggests, “whatever the content of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant 2006:21; emphasis in original). There is a cost to giving up this commitment, potentially an unbearable one, and Stella does not wish to pay it. As above in the meeting with Stella, Keith and Ena, a similar relation operates with Stalinism or revolution: they can be silently addressed only in their absence.

Following Freud (1957), one might argue that this is an inability to decathect, this denial of the passing of the moment of revolutionary possibility (and a rejection of the reality of the loss of a son) implies a melancholic state. But who can predict the future? Who knows if the revolution might not come to pass? One might wonder instead, given the specific vision of communism that the COS and Stella hold, and given their alienated but nonetheless near-total submersion in capitalist society, will they be ready to embrace (and even lead, as they seek to) the moment when it arrives?

As Stella said in the wake of her separation from Doug, she still had good things in her life: “Writing, working, having friends; and Internationalism, which I won’t see…”

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61 There were many open questions and challenges in writing this chapter. Here is one: Is there, in her relation to me and to others who are possible recruits, “a fake present moment of intersubjectivity in which, nonetheless, a performance of address” (Berlant 2008:34) takes place? Note the passages in Chapter 3 where I got the impression that I was not really present for Stella.
This deferral of the utopian moment that she lives and works for beyond her own lifetime seemed an acknowledgment of the objective world situation, one that is echoed by other first generation members of COS who shared their views with me. At the same time, and this is where the idea of a cruel optimism seems apposite, this cruelty lies in that “…the very vitalising or animating potency of an object…contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place” (Berlant 2008:34). The deferral of utopian revolution is not a moment of recognition, of decathecting from an attachment that has become unviable. Rather, it is a heading off, a foreclosure of the possibility of the promise being betrayed. Life can go on in the present if one completes the circle of cruel optimism, of “maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss,” (Berlant 2011:21; emphasis in original) thereby defeating the suspension that nonetheless characterizes life as lived today. In this way, a life is made possible for Stella and others of her generation in the COS, one that holds many good things and is vitalized by the helping of others, including “international” persons such as myself. Perhaps, by deferring the revolution permanently they defeat the cruelty of their optimism by defeating the very possibility of the loss of their attachment. In the interim, they continue to live, to share, to help, and to work.

Seen another way, this interim, this interstice is the very duration of their lives since the passing of the industrial age into the financialized one. These radicals have raised radicals, they have also failed to raise radicals. They have mobilized a few, and also failed to mobilize many. They have bought iPhones designed in California and made in China, and also never failed to criticize the global superexploitation of the working class. They have refused to withdraw from U.S. society into an enclosed place such as a
commune, and they have also refused to refuse the many comforts offered them by capitalism. As Stella says, “I hate capitalism, but sometimes you have to breathe, you have to be able to breathe.” Is radicalism and a commitment to communism an inability to breathe? Isn’t breathing in capitalism akin to inhaling poison? Deny and defer permanently as they might, are their lives a breath that is caught? The “unachievable fantasy” of a good life, internationalist or capitalist, is cruel indeed.

**Deferral and suspension**

Stella’s permanent deferral of Internationalism—she expects not to see it enacted through a global revolution in her lifetime—indexes a generalized deferral of “realizing” this internal good object. Nonetheless, this deferral, while it often creates painful situations, is a functional one. Stella continues to live and work, and remains hopeful about love. I find useful here the idea of a structure of relationality posited by Berlant, as it allows a consideration of the continuity that exists in Stella’s life, which perhaps the sense of melancholy might not. This structure, whatever one’s view of it (tragic, unreal), sustains Stella.

While Berlant’s language is exemplary and precise, it seems to me that Žižek’s criticism (acknowledged by Berlant), that this form of examination of the current moment presents the risk of a narcissistic self exploration, is not without merit (Berlant 2011:14). Separately, it behooves one to note that a Deleuzean approach to an attachment risks abdicating not just the unconscious, but the subject entirely. To that extent, I return to psychoanalysis as a humanist epistemology more appropriate to our discipline and its
signature method, as compared to a anti-humanist Deleuzean one.\textsuperscript{62} Berlant traces influences from psychoanalysis (2011:13,16; although note that she seeks a move away from theories of trauma),\textsuperscript{63} and makes a telling note that there is a “refraction” of the rather less esoteric “structures of feeling” from Raymond Williams in her work.\textsuperscript{64}

In any case, I have examined this suspension as a perennial fear of self-betrayal for self-styled communists submerged in a “capitalist” socioeconomic system. The continuing use of “capitalism” reveals that the COS and Stella do not wish to acknowledge and accommodate financialization in their analysis. Symptomatic of their suspension, they need to frame the current moment as capitalism to perpetuate and reconstruct the oppositional binary of capitalism and communism. In Chapter 4 I delve into the sociality offered by the COS to each other, and the sustenance offered by familiar terms of analysis that are held over from a time when hope appeared in the present. In their trenchant anti-capitalism, they use language in vogue during the student revolt of

\textsuperscript{62} For more on the possible antinomies of this approach, to which Berlant’s work should not be assimilated completely, see Žižek (2004). For a working through of the affirmation of melancholy in queer theory and postcolonial studies, see Žižek (2000).

\textsuperscript{63} A move I am not certain is accomplished by her claim that certain authors whose work she finds resonant continue to think in terms of an orientation to the future. I sense she has not de- or a-temporalized her own observations enough to make this claim, or in fact the claim that cruel optimism differs from melancholia in that the latter is a “desire to temporize and experience of the loss of an object…” (2006:21). Again it is important to add that differentiation from melancholia is not the only defining feature of cruel optimism.

\textsuperscript{64} It leaves at least this user of the idea of cruel optimism somewhat ambivalent. Perhaps that is integral, to the concept itself but also to the disciplinary boundary that we speak across, one that I am desirous of generally adhering to, albeit with an open mind.

\textsuperscript{65} I use “capitalism” here in accord with Stella, and COS’s continued use. Given the changes since 1973 according to multiple authoritative periodizations (for one see Jameson 1991, and in general the discussion of financialization above. For a general assessment of the crisis in the classic category of social class, very apposite to the situation of the COS, see Jameson 1984), one would expect activist Marxists to perhaps update their analysis, taking account of changes in the system of production and accumulation and the social life that goes along with it. The COS does not do this. It is just as well, allowing them to maintain a contraposition between communism and capitalism which then allows for another temporal shift or incongruence: Stella does not acknowledge financialization and needs to re-frame it, to render it as capitalism so as to reconstruct the oppositional binary of the Stalinist era. This speaks to the forms of suspension and deferral I address here and in Chapter 4.
1960s in the U.S. They claim they do not now expect to see the revolution in their lifetime, and take concrete steps to hand over leadership to younger members. Financialization over the last 30 years has simply strengthened their resolve to destroy the system, although this moment is now deferred for those who have been there the longest, and the baton is passed to the next generation.

The majority of founding members came together in universities, and are generally economically secure. They partake of the comforts of a relatively well-off life in the U.S., living in society (as opposed to withdrawing from society into a commune) and working in skilled occupations. Yet, they are staunchly anti-capitalist, detest the system, and hope for the end-times of a global war and revolution in its wake. This fundamental contradiction between their radical ideology and their daily life experience, as well as the recognition that they do not live in a moment of revolutionary upheaval, creates a difficult situation, even a crisis. Living in the U.S., how can they remain pure? Every action and situation can be tinged with the doubt that it may corrupt and co-opt them, that they might imperceptibly lose their radical edge living in this most advanced of capitalist nations. This fear of self-betrayal haunts the most committed and earnest members.

And yet, they persist. The COS holds on to its beliefs, based on the ideology of a historical movement, and personified in the historical figure of Joseph Stalin. This figure of Stalin they defend from all criticism as if it is a good object in a phantasmatic world.

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66 Their public actions and private gatherings and meetings are sometimes conducted with a mild air of secrecy from surveillance. Lately, being more open, being more expressive about one’s political commitments to a real public of kin, friends, co-workers, chance encounters (such as myself), but also to a certain imagined public that is wide and deep, *international*, and a potential convert to their vision.
67 On internal objects, see Klein (1975) and Winnicott (1969). On phantasy, see Isaacs (1948).
Absent in fact, it is a good object that holds all bad objects at bay, a good object that 
holds them,\textsuperscript{68} allows them to live with hope and positivity about the future. Yet, the 
condition for this belief to sustain, I argue, is the permanent deferral of this hoped for 
future. The apocalypse that will be succeeded by a utopian age in which “each will 
contribute according to his ability, to each according to his commitment,”\textsuperscript{69} is inevitable 
per the beliefs of the COS. This age, however, must come after the lives of the original 
generation of COS members are over. Why they would be confounded if the revolution 
they so fervently propagate actually came to pass is one of the intriguing questions about 
the COS. Briefly here, it is the very possibility, the potency of revolution that lends it the 
power it has, and allows COS members to remain expectant, hopeful, and crucially, 
suspended. This mythical reservoir of the past remains productive only because it has not 
been consumed, must not congeal into an actual revolution. In the present, the failure to 
 enact the “journey of a thousand miles” towards the revolution is the failure to go around 
the corner and across the street, literally and metaphorically (further in chapters 1 and 3). 
The deferral of the revolution permanently into the future allows it to remain pure.\textsuperscript{70} 

While in the case of Otis and those of his ilk, it is society that refuses them 
recognition of self in a form they might accept, for the COS, the rejection of their society 
implies the self is thrown in perennial doubt. It is split, as it were. The COS members 
ostensibly have a clear understanding of what is wrong with the world; the evil is 
capitalism itself. This permits an all out war on the given world in which everything is 

\textsuperscript{68} On “holding.” see Ogden (2004) and Winnicott (1965 [1960]) 
\textsuperscript{69} This is COS’s reformulation of Marx’s famous dictum. “Need” is replaced with “Commitment.” It makes 
sense as, largely belonging to the middle class, most of them do not have unfulfilled “needs.” 
\textsuperscript{70} Isn’t this why the use of Stalin as a figure for revolution is so jarring? He precisely was the one that 
followed in the wake of the revolution, precisely the socialist who was not a revolutionary. And does that 
help understand why the real revolution is unfathomable for the COS members?
considered impure, polluted. This total rejection however, turns in on them, living in a system that permeates the self while it is intellectually apprehended as destructive of all humanity. The subjectivity that sought, and seek to develop to oppose capitalism, personified in the figure of Stalin also fails; the revolution does not arrive and capitalism continues its triumphant march. The identity they grew up with, and the identity they conjured as revolutionaries both do not succeed. Although they derive sustenance and support from each other, the paradoxical doubt created by their lucid anti-capitalism returns again and again. They are left permanently suspended in this oscillation between conviction and doubt, forever waiting for the revolutionary moment. In fact, they insist on waiting.

**Honor and Glory**

Many scholars argue that mass incarceration and the criminal justice system in the USA has been systemic and essential to the social order of America since the end of Jim Crow (Alexander 2012, Garland 2002). The prison and the ghetto have become symbiotic institutions, operated along a “waste management model” with a strong racial aspect (Wacquant 2001, Alexander 2012, Simon 2007). The public imagination of mass incarceration was facilitated by the declaration of a War on Drugs by Ronald Reagan, leading to an unprecedented expansion of the prison system (Gottschalk 2006, 2008; Thompson 2010). Prison has turned into a “normal socializing institution” (Simon 2007:472), drawing attention to the informal contributions of such mechanisms to a

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71 There is an undeniable bias against African Americans in the U.S. criminal justice system. As of 2006, one in every fourteen black men was in prison, the number rising to one in four for young African Americans, and nearly seven million people in total were under the control of the correctional system – jail, prison, parole, probation, and forms of community supervision (Gottschalk 2006, Alexander 2012). These numbers are at odds with the comparative rates of drug crime among all groups, including whites (who in fact had the largest rate of drug sale and usage activities per the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, 2000).
system of social and racial control (Alexander 2012, Wacquant 2001, Gottschalk 2006). The social, and the legal stigma of incarceration (or merely being arrested) confers a permanent “second-class citizen” status, imposing civil disabilities in employment, housing, credit, welfare entitlements, and voting rights. Incarceration is a concrete life-possibility for many black men, something well within the horizon of the probable.

Saleem and Haider, the protagonists of Chapter 5, “Glory,” are concrete examples of men who have been through the criminal justice system. Having been sentenced and imprisoned, their primary opportunities to provide for themselves and their kin remain in the informal and illicit economy, meaning that being sentenced and imprisoned is a permanent possibility for them. They apprehend accurately their liminal integration and institutional marginality vis-a-vis mainstream society and polity (Cacho 2012; Patterson 1982).

The black man, dead or posing, threatens society and our sense of order. He induces fear and invites approval of his relegation to the margins where he can kill other black men, be killed in incidents with law enforcement, or be locked away in a place where “citizens” are safe from him, and he can be brutalized as his nature demands he must be (while also being profited from by being worked at a miniscule fraction of minimum wage, and from tax dollars spent on prisons). This cluster of prejudice, fear, and hatred makes us all feel safe when a politician, Democrat or Republican, proclaims his love for being “tough on crime.” Socially dishonored, an object of fear and marginal

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72 In 2000, 1.8 million African Americans, or one in seven, were barred from voting due to felon disenfranchisement laws. Instructively, such suffrage laws have seen an upsurge after the Civil War and the civil rights movement (Thompson 2010). Counted as residents of the largely white rural areas where they are imprisoned, these prisoners inadvertently transfer millions of dollars in state aid as well as disproportionate representation in elections to the white rural hinterland.
to society, it is exactly as this dishonorable, fear-inducing persona that the black man is
of value to capitalist politics and economy.

A convenient hold-all and “commonsensical” invocation of a cluster of biases, fears and prejudice, the black man serves a versatile set of functions for “mainstream” society in the United States. Unless exhilarating and entertaining the audience in commodified spectacles of sport or artistic endeavor, black men (specifically those from low income urban neighborhoods who work in the informal economy), are the most maligned persona in U.S. society. Mainstream national and local media regularly purveys stories replete with sensationalized detail about how one of these black men met his fate, or destroyed the life of a law abiding, good citizen.

Through an interpretation of an exemplary story of aggressive exchanges between two interlocutors, this chapter tries to interpret and portray an alternative understanding of this maligned persona. Why did these two men struggle with each other, why did this struggle persist for so long, and why did this struggle remain non-violent? The answers to these questions inform the conclusion to this dissertation which reflects on politics, government, and the state.

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73 The working black man, middle class or working class, while he may show up in the odd advertisement, remains invisible in the public imagination. Athletes and entertainers and those involved in these two industries, are the popular black figures.

74 The focus has shifted recently, with state violence against this figure finally made hypervisible by movements such as Black Lives Matter. It is unclear as yet whether this inaugurates a new, sustained era of protest akin to the Civil Rights Movement that constituted a historic upheaval in the racial order of the United States.
Conducting Fieldwork

I lived in RapCity for three years, two of which were spent actively in participant-observation. I followed the classic strategy of “hanging out,” presenting myself on the street everyday and seeking out conversations. I introduced myself to residents where possible—local stores, outside homes on sunny days, and through introductions from those who knew me. Different parts of the fieldsite lent themselves to different modalities of meeting people and building relationships. In residential streets of RapCity and Sleepytown, I met potential participants in homes after having a few conversations on the telephone with them. Where possible, I conducted narrative life history interviews over multiple sessions. With the COS, I regularly attended the informal group meeting that happened near my home, and scheduled time with members at my residence or in restaurants and coffee shops for unstructured conversations and narrative interviews. In addition, I attended public events conducted by the COS, whether protest rallies on specific issues, or indoor meetings at venues such as churches and member homes.

On the street, data collection was much more fragmented and staccato in nature. The descriptions in the chapters that follow indicate the nature of these interactions, as well as the general tenor of life on the street at different times of the day. For the first six or so months, I mainly encountered suspicion and reticence, antagonism and indifference. After a few breakthroughs, data collection was still constrained by the lack of a sustained period of time at most times during the day. Most conversations of any significant length occurred in the evening, standing on the sidewalks in the streets that ran off the boulevard, or in backyards of a few interlocutors’ homes. I generally did not visit the residence of anyone working in the illicit economy during the research. It was the
evolution of a mutual strategy of maintaining a distance, so as to not arouse suspicions and prevent the experience of vulnerability that often occurs after a sharing of confidences on the street.

Moments of intimacy occurred nonetheless, and a general rule of thumb to gauge if an unstructured conversation had gone well was to see if my interlocutor avoided further conversation for a few days. Trust was not an easy commodity to part with, but many of the men I met on the street eventually became comfortable with telling their stories.

The chapters of this dissertation aimed first and foremost for a fidelity to description, driven by the goal of evoking the place, bringing the reader there if possible. Preparing a theoretical framework and then selecting exemplary quotes and vignettes to illustrate or problematize concepts was not my approach to writing. That this dissertation is primarily written for an audience of four readers made this approach a little less risky. Nonetheless, it came with uncertainties, lacking the promise of an a priori closure that would have made the task of writing a little more definitive. Interpretive openings emerged through description and in some places still retain an open character. Nonetheless, I have not hesitated to make claims, propose ideas, or become closed to alternative, even contradictory interpretation of my material. I remain comfortable with the tradeoff.

The descriptive exposition of each chapter is informed by an approach to participant observation that, apart from the abstracted discussion in the Introduction here, is evoked throughout the chapters that follow. Chapter 1 stands closest to the early stages of fieldwork, where I was more observer than participant. The use of phenomenology
was easiest at this stage, as I was in a new place, a place with two spaces. Things were unfamiliar, the corners, curves, municipal boundaries, bodies, daily sounds, and rhythms making the greatest impression. Not only that, but the quality of interactions was also different from what was possible later, as relationships developed and greater intimacy ensued with some of my interlocutors. This is reflected first in the analysis of the divided space, as the “natural” boundaries and forms of movement were expressed to me by participants. These expressions, as the chapter discusses, were bodily first and linguistic second. Rahim was disturbed by the way I stood before he spoke. Stella turned in a way that was obvious and un-thought for her but curious to me, and only interrupting her “natural” bodily expression produced speech that explained or brought into language what was phenomenally simply was; it was just the way her place and her bodily space was organized. Second, the logic of these theoretical choices was also contoured by the ethnographic material: short, staccato moments leading to bodily impasses and cryptic conversations, the descriptions filled with speculations and questions, as I knew little and observed much, as I asked with hesitation and sought to build easier flows of conversation over time. Things were new, the place was unfamiliar, people did not know me.75

Some of these “guesses” could have been confirmed, and they are. However, the speculative moments of chapter 1 are entirely consistent with an inquiry that not only achieved greater depth as it matured, but also changed. The gentleman from the

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75 It is impossible to overemphasize how much an integral reticence to outsiders and strangers framed the conditions of this research, at the beginning, and over time. There were people I saw everyday for three years, and we never exchanged a word. Some rebuffed me, but even more so, it was somehow obvious with others that we would never speak to each other. Silences, the nods and fist bumps of their absence described in chapter 1, were in many cases the structured modality, as well as the very limit of my interactions with certain individuals.
Caribbean and the lady from Haiti did not take part in my research, leaving open the mutual discomfort that I perceived, or projected, between them. At the same time, had they participated, I doubt this sedimented discomfort would have been explicated. I might have asked, but I doubt I would have gotten an answer. To compare similar interactions early in fieldwork where guessing was unnecessary, Rahim spoke an answer to an unsolicited question. I asked Stella because we had already known each other for some time, and even though we had not met or lived in proximity, her openness made it easy; the question itself (“what’s over there”) was not too sensitive, given my obvious naivete at the time, new to the place, and the objective of our walk, for her to show us around the neighborhood. Further, I learned more about Stella and the COS over time, and the question of why she turned where she did is addressed again in chapter 4, where it becomes a concern with the uneven results of a persistent effort to effect an ideological vision in the world. COS members do indeed “cross the street,” they do seek to create “intentional communities.” Yet, as Keith and Stella’s silence around Ena’s experiences hinted, there is a more intractable difference that prevents communitas.

To this extent, theories of space and spatial production do not frame the research, serving their purpose for my inquiry to the extent they do in chapter 1. The phenomenological approach to spatiality and the body’s projects could certainly have gone further. However, as the quality of our encounters changed, the intersubjective dynamic within which knowledge was being produced lent itself much more to the other ideas that begin to find articulation in chapter 2 and beyond. To telegraphically explain these conceptual choices, and this general approach with the same example: I could certainly have continued with an approach that investigated the forms of bodily vigilance,
the spatial organization of bodies across the municipal line and the bodily organization of space within and across these lines. A phenomenological essence might have been pursued, perhaps then reduced to multiple categories such as race and class. But what of Otis’s predictions of destruction? What of the sadness and hope of Stella? What of Victor’s tacit reticence and lifelong but undogmatic commitment? What about the deferral of the revolution beyond their lives by COS members, and what of the suspension in the here and now, one that has persisted across “space and time” for a lifetime now?

To reiterate, I did not enter the field to study phenomenology or space, or even “race,” this last a choice I defended at public forums within the university and asserted as a productive intellectual choice as a person who has not inhabited the racial binary of the United States in any experiential sense. To be sure, there was not the blankness of an alien from outer space, I have read about and was inspired by the stories of black leaders from the United States, just as the injustices of the caste system moved me to act within my own country. However, there is still something to cultural difference in this globalized era, and I was keen to find what I might learn in encounters across cultural difference, rather than frame an inquiry around a discourse that has greater experiential validity and purchase for those born and raised here, and moved to think and act.

Neither did I enter the field to study theories of conspiracy, and I knew little to nothing about theories of witchcraft. I worked through a concept from cultural studies—cruel optimism—whose theoretical roots I remain uncomfortable with. I have learned more from Marxian analyses than is apparent here. These self-referential gestures, the overarching arc, the sense of something finished now that I have gone to and come back
from the field; these seem to me to do a great violence to the experience, cutting and
dessicating it for the benefit of clarity. To be entirely clear, the choice of materials that
make it into the chapters, the framing of narratives, the organization of storylines, the
choice of interpretive directions; all of these are done here. What has not been done is the
hardened prefiguring of a social-scientific inquiry committed to one theoretical frame and
one inviolable set of questions. How can one do participant observation that way?

This is not a postmodern claim of the absence of certainty, it is simply the
assertion of an absence of closure. This dissertation makes claims, and tries to do so
without excessive qualification, but it is not assimilated to one theoretical framework or a
laundry list of “fields of study.” It is an ethnography, conducted with an interpretive and
intersubjective approach which has one guiding premise: between one and the other there
is a gap, and that gap is where knowledge is produced.

**On Confidentiality**

This research was conducted under the aegis and guidelines of the Rutgers
University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. I used a
variety of procedures to protect the identity of research participants. To begin with, I
changed the names of all participants. I did this in a random manner, without any explicit
system or logic for giving the names. Many of the names were chosen because they were
easy to pronounce for me and also seen on U.S. websites, which I took to mean they were
used here. I changed occupations, biographical details such as place of birth and age, and
made modifications to descriptions of physical appearance, styles of clothing, height,
weight, and facial descriptions as well.
Interactions with interlocutors on the street brought their own obfuscations and glosses on actual fact. For instance, in the case of quite a few participants, I never made an effort to learn their real name, sticking instead to their street moniker, and changing it when I wrote about them in the dissertation. I let many potential participants know that I was not interested in the following: their real name, their occupation or what they did to earn money, their current and past residence, their involvement (if any) in the informal economy, any past records of criminal activity, any future plans that might expose them to illegal activity, their sources of income, their current livelihood practices, and any and all involvement in actions, plans, or any other thing of this nature that might implicate them in the legal system now or in the future. This might appear to be an active attempt at foreclosing data collection, but was informed by difficult assessments about what possible harms might come to research subjects. Further, most of these details did not impinge on getting information about other aspects of their lives, and that material shows here in the dissertation and is available for multiple interpretations.

In addition, concerns of confidentiality and surveillance were formative in this research because they were important for my interlocutors themselves, independent of their participation in the research. Note what one’s real name is called on the street: “government.” Especially on the street, my interlocutors were well versed in how the state sees. A concern with giving away too much—information, emotion, friendliness, letting down too much of one’s guard—was a constitutive condition of fieldwork. Accordingly, some strategies became part of my disposition, part of my ‘ways of asking and behaving,’ as it were. This was not just an issue for my research subjects alone; as a “temporary non-immigrant,” I shared concerns of being tracked by some data collection
agency, digital communications such as SMS texts, emails, phone conversations with interlocutors being subject to surveillance.

Further, I generally avoided giving precise dates and venues for events, and sometimes changed the venue purposefully to disguise the precise location. Readers will find references to “summer,” “a while back,” and other such references within the broad time frame during which I conducted this research. Given the interpretive approaches taken in the dissertation, I generally did not need to stick to a chronological ordering of events either. The only time period (year) which can be identified is perhaps in chapter 1, which delves into the impressions specific to beginning fieldwork. Here as well, things are not as clear as they might appear. Where required, I have given the year, but this is not always the one when the material being presented actually occurred.

Ethnographic research throws up constant challenges relating to the production of knowledge, the ethics of relationship building, and the protection of research subjects’ confidentiality. The anthropologist must make judgments and choices about possible risks and potential benefits and where data must be withheld from published work. In my case, I followed a model of fieldwork that was not predicated on strict control of the ethnographic encounters. Such control was difficult in any case given (for instance) the nature of daily life on the boulevard and in the informal economy. But even in other settings, I was rapidly disabused of the notion that I could control the kinds of relationships I formed or the kinds of confidences I might become privy to. Not all relationships were collegial, not all of them were distant, and not all of them were driven by an idealized mutuality where I was certain that I would receive something, and equally certain that I could “give something back.”
The process of considering what and how to write brought home what is perhaps a truism in anthropology today: the principle of knowledge co-production is not just part of the period of fieldwork, but can become a part of the process of writing as well. Many of my interlocutors are now good friends as well, a part of my social network of relations in a country and a culture to which I am an outsider. I tacitly shared details and themes I was writing about, gauging their thoughts and reactions and sometimes also receiving confirmations or opportunities to redevelop my insights.

This ongoing process of dialogue also allowed me to go beyond the mandated process of “informed consent,” something I reiterated to participants at opportune moments during fieldwork. It is easy to imagine that just as the ethnographer does not know in advance what she or he might write after fieldwork, what narrative and interpretation and theoretical frame would change the material collected, so it is with those who share their time and their stories; research participants consent, but may often wake the morning after the evening before, wondering where their relationship with this “cultural anthropologist” ends, and where his research begins.

I was alert to the moments where I could touch upon the research process again with my interlocutors, repeating not just the details of the informed consent process but speaking of the unique nature of relationships we had formed, and how they impinged upon my ability to ‘analyze and interpret’ just as my labor of analyzing and interpreting impinged on a conversation that might have gone on for hours well into the night. Even when participants did not explicitly raise the issue months after they have given me consent and we had participated in each other’s routines, I tried to address my dual identity as a person they knew, and my vocation as someone who “writes on it.”
One potential participant was writing their own life story and dropped out of my research after one long telephone conversation. Another was also writing a book but participated wholeheartedly, not telling me they were writing about themselves until recently. On the street, along with tacitly maintained boundaries about those activities that might potentially put my interlocutors and me at risk if discussed or written about, there was also a constant mutual doubt that never completely went away. Could I be a police spy? Were they telling me anything that was true? Was I really who I said I was? Would knowing their real name have changed anything about this doubt about what is “true,” given that suspicion is not specific to this research situation, but is integral to a life under surveillance and perennial vigilance is an essential quality. Regarding questions of collaboration and trust, “one never really knows” (Duneier 1999:14).

It seems appropriate to conclude this discussion about confidentiality, ethics, privacy, harm, responsibility, beneficence, risk and so on by talking of Stella. I have consent to write about her. In sharing her life and experiences with me, Stella continued the same generosity with which she has lived and worked. Stella was also an ongoing part of my life (she still is). There are others who barely feature in this dissertation or not at all because our relations turned into friendships that made it easy to make the choice of just cherishing the relation at the expense of the data.

With Stella, it went much further. This research has affected me emotionally, and at times it became impossible to write. Writing about Stella presented me with this dilemma in its starkest form: it was too painful at times, too difficult. After writing one draft of what became chapter 3, I gave up and avoided it for a very long time, hoping I could fold that narrative into the story of the collective, turn it into a minor footnote in the
could fold that narrative into the story of the collective, turn it into a minor footnote in the story of the COS’s grand vision. Ironically, this would be entirely in line with the COS’s outlook, which places the collective always over the individual. But I believe it was my responsibility to write. Not just about the COS, but about Stella as Stella—the individual, ‘warts and all’ and not only the collective—at the center of a story. Writing about her as she revealed herself to me, and to do it as truthfully and honestly as I could, seemed to me the most ethical thing I could do. I believe I had no other choice.
The Invisible Door

There is no space in a hierarchized society that is not itself hierarchized and that does not express hierarchies and social distances, in a form that is more or less distorted and above all, disguised by the naturalization effect produced by the long-term inscription of social realities in the natural world.

…social space is defined by the mutual exclusion (or distinction of the positions that constitute it, that is, as a juxtapositional structure of social positions… The value of different regions of reified social space is defined in this relation between the distribution of agents and the distribution of goods in social space. [Bourdieu 1999:124-125]

Prologue: Imagine Two Spaces in one Place

Imagine a space

Imagine a space where everything is normal. All that happens, everyday, morning and evening with an afternoon lull. Its normal, there is no need to question it. There is no need to wonder…a place where everyone is a little on edge and it is normal. A day care center receives children. A storefront church distributes food. A man steps carefully to avoid a half eaten bone left out in the street. A 73-year-old man sweeps the sidewalk in front of a convenience store, where locals spend money on lottery tickets. The pension he receives from a long defunct airplane parts manufacturing company sustains his basement room, his meals and his habit.

Notices on buildings urge “NO LOITERING” and promise strenuous prosecution of trespassers. Three groups of 2-3 people stand around in their places on the sidewalk. They are waiting for the next person who will shake hands with them. This person they wait for is not one particular person; this person is a type, and these men hope to meet many such persons today. They stand, talk, and mark time.
A middle aged woman walks down the sidewalk. She has close cropped hair, and wears a t-shirt with the front tied up to reveal her flat midriff, a pair of black jeans, and shoes. She is tall, slender, and dark. Her walk, to nowhere in particular, is filled with a swing, a pulse. Long slender arms often thrown out from the elbow, sometimes to wave to someone across the street, but often just swung out to a rhythm. She swings her hips, throws her arm out and brings it back, slows, shuffles, steps forward again. She is dancing! Whenever she walks, she dances. Or rather, she dances while walking, dancing in motion. Later, you will see her at the local barbershop, dancing to a song that is playing on the stereo now, using her cleaning broom as a prop, pausing often and performing dance moves as she kneels down to pick up a piece of garbage, or swinging the broom around on the ground, gathering hair. No one watches.

A man walks down the sidewalk in the opposite direction. He is wearing a hat and glasses, shorter than the woman you just saw, dressed all in brown – brown hat, brown jacket, brown trousers and somewhat worn brown shoes. His walk lacks the rhythmic grace of the woman’s, but it has a shuffling rhythm of its own. His legs, somewhat bowed, move with toes giving the impression of pointing upward. His stocky frame sways in a semicircle from one side to the other as he walks, hinting at difficulty of motion. But he keeps moving, turns the corner from the sidewalk on to his street, and makes his way up the stairs to the second floor of his home shared with others. He will sit at the window in the rain, wondering about something.

Four 18 year olds buy their morning supply of marijuana and smoke it on the street, in full view of three hi-tech surveillance cameras installed by the police, under a sign that says “ALL DRUG SALES IN THIS AREA ARE RECORDED AND
REPORTED TO POLICE.” One of them wears an electronic bracelet, having been recently released after two months in juvenile detention for trying to rob a taxi driver. His father was glad and exasperated—glad his son was alive because the taxi driver might have been carrying a gun for his own safety, and exasperated because his son was dumb enough to not think of this, trying to rob a taxi on a busy street.

Everyone is on edge. This is a place with an edge, although the “real gangsters” down the road might scoff at the notion. The gangsters here? They’re more like rock stars. They show up late to work, many came from “good” families, they never really built a market. “The niggers down the hill think these guys are, like, bitches,” a man tells me.

This is RapCity, a once Great American City, now one of New Jersey’s poorest and most crime-ridden cities.

I sit at my window, the one in the kitchen, in the third floor of the apartment building at the corner. From here, I can see the boulevard, the two streets that run off it to the left, and the stop light, beyond which everything in this place becomes pathological. Imagine this other space in this place.

**Imagine a space**

Imagine a space where everything is normal. All that happens. Its normal, unquestioned. It necessitates no discomfort, or nervousness… as long as one does not cross over to the ‘other side.’ Gas lamps give the street an old-fashioned romantic glow at night. Stable families live here: retired folks or those with school going children. Somehow they have all prospered, squirreled away investments in stocks and bonds. The
streets are quiet most days, residents out to work or leisure. Second cars sit parked in driveways.

I look out of the window when visiting a friend here. A squirrel runs across the lawn and up a tree as a car passes, slowing at the large speed bump that threatens its chassis in front of a house with an ornate wooden door and an automatic sprinkler in the lawn. The sidewalks are even, and today the sun shines on them, bright and sparkling. There is no one to be seen outside. Everyone is inside, or away. Life is inside here, or away.

At her desk sits a woman, playing with her very short white hair as she stares at a computer screen. She writes a few words, takes a sip of wine, and stares at the screen again. One of her cats walks by, pauses, receives no attention. She wraps herself around the woman’s leg, finally getting a scratch and a sound of affection. The woman’s hand comes away with cat hair; the cat is old and shedding profusely. She returns hands (and hair) to the keyboard; some words have come to her mind and she transmits them to the screen. She has recently learned to save her work in the “cloud.”

Her now-estranged husband comes into the garage. She senses him from her desk, and tries to see him without being seen from the kitchen window that overlooks the backyard. She has put some papers for him on a friend’s car window, parked in the garage alongside her own. She says the friend’s car window “has become a repository of communication” with the estranged husband.

Of medium height, this man has a good physique, hair thick at the back and almost gone from the front. He wears ankle high boots from which a pair of white socks peek out; beige shorts, a t-shirt and sunglasses. He has a beard, not too thick, around a
face that is oval and handsome. He gets out of his car, parked in the driveway, and walks over to the garage door. Lifting it up, he muddles through to the front of the car that belongs to his estranged wife’s friend, who also is his friend. Two large mail envelopes filled with papers lie there, on the front of his friend’s car. These are tax papers, prepared by his estranged wife’s accountant. The accountant recommends that they file taxes together this year at least, as that would save them a significant sum of money. He is hedging, wondering if he should take the papers or not. He is hedging in general, wondering if this – the separation, the impending divorce – is beneficial for him. He lacks, for now, the initiative to find out if filing taxes another way will be better. He makes a decision. Leaving the papers where they lie, above the wipers on the front window, he backs out of the garage and gets in his car. Reversing it slowly out of the driveway, he leaves.

Across the street from this now-estranged couple’s home, the neighbor backs her car out of her driveway. It is late and dark. She is driving two blocks over to the other side to drop off a friend. She lives alone in a three-bedroom home; now retired from her teaching job; she leads a quiet life, visits family once in a while, looks through old photos when she wants to remember, and welcomes a young ethnographer interested in her life to write down her life history.

Everything here is normal, yet there is a sense of something always lurking around the corner. This is Sleepytown, a community of well-maintained two-story, single-family homes.

Standing
“You been standing with your back to the Ave for a while now, man.” We were chatting for a few minutes when Rahim abruptly said this to me. I was in the middle of a sentence, and he blurted it out, interrupting me with a friendly but skeptical smile and raised eyebrows. We were standing on the sidewalk in front of the convenience store. On his way home from work, Rahim had stopped at the store to pick up a bar of snickers, some potato chips, and a “Dutch,” cigars sold in individual blue packages. We ran into each other as he walked out.

We were catching up on the week since we last met each other. I had noticed that Rahim scowled once or twice, quizzically curling his eyebrows at me during pauses or when I was speaking. Eventually he recognized what was bothering him: it was the way I was standing on the sidewalk as we spoke. My back was turned square on to the “Ave,” the long boulevard that ran from a few miles back in RapCity all the way through Sleepytown and beyond. Something about my body positioned in that place did not sit right with Rahim, troubling him in an inchoate way till he finally put a finger on it.

Body Positioning and Rules of Vigilance

“I knew you had my back,” I said, returning to what had been bothering Rahim a few minutes ago. “You were saying I’ve been standing with my back to the ave,” I reminded him. I knew what he was talking about of course. Once I began to live here, I learned quite soon that you do not stand with your back to the street. In one direction or the other—the blocks past the Laundromat that went “down the hill” to the left, or past the stop light to the right where RapCity ended and a sign welcomed you to “Sleepytown: Settled in 1666”—your body had to face the boulevard.

76 Real names changed throughout.
Rahim nodded and smiled at my excuse, which was also a show of respect to him, a man who knew how to stand. In fact, he knew exactly what to do and how to deal with people here, in the neighborhood he called home. He broke into explanation. “You should tilt a little to this side when hanging out [the left side of the boulevard as we stood], like so [he showed with his body, moving it out of position and then back into the correct posture]. These two cars right here, they always there, so that’s nothing, but who’s pulling up [keep an eye out for that]. You know the guys slinging here, so that’s fine. See any new motherfuckers; take a [closer] look. You see a young nigger looking restless, that’s when you brace. Now this side [to our right and merging into Sleepytown past the stop light 50 feet away], you should keep an eye for who is coming down Jefferson [street], past that building being renovated. And you know there’s no hanging out beyond that light [where RapCity turns into Sleepytown],” he ended with a laugh, rendering and teaching me in words the general social habitus (Mauss 1979 [1934]:73), the bodily disposition, the techniques of vigilance for anyone standing on the sidewalk on this side of the invisible door separating RapCity and Sleepytown in New Jersey.

Marcel Mauss noted the significance of morphological and ecological features on the social life of a group in a specific place (1979 [1906]), as well as the specificity of “attitude[s] of the body,” which contain aspects of both mimesis and education (1979 [1934]:71, 73). Furthermore, certain forms of bodily position and disposition to movements of the police and other men in the informal economy, that is, “a series of assembled actions,” (76) relates to what is described as “prestigious imitation… imposed

77 Non-gang affiliated youth are the most feared persona on the street today. They are considered unpredictable and uncontrollable. “They got no brains, but they got guns,” “you can’t tell them shit,” are common refrains, especially the latter. Men over thirty that seek their livelihood on the street often expressed this frustration about the younger generation.
from without” (74). Critically, for Mauss these actions are produced by society, determined for the person by “the place he occupies in it” (76).

Different scenes and moments from this place evoke a sense of the nature of a division that is quite visible yet simultaneously tacit and “invisible” to the inhabitants. The divisions—across social class, built environment, and bodily hexis—create the backdrop to the divergent experiences of the protagonists and their stories told in the subsequent chapters. That I learned from Rahim what many others of a new generation—younger men coming into informal activities but without affiliation or belonging to social formations such as gangs—seemed to have become inattentive to by the time I left the field, shows ruptures in social and cultural transmission. “There is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition” (75). The techniques of working on the street are dissipating in this place, and what will emerge in their place is an open question, open to question in a subsequent inquiry.

The threat of state or interpersonal violence, as well as the lulls of daily work on the street play a large role in the body technique of spending time, standing and working for hours at a time. The divisions of the street into a vertical boulevard and perpendicular streets that intersect and flow away from it, as well as the municipal boundary between the city of RapCity and the township of Sleepytown form a certain spatial ecology. The built environment changes according to this municipal division. Shops and traffic add to the liveliness of the streets in RapCity which are mixed use, comprising single family homes, apartment buildings and storefronts. Life is lived largely indoors in Sleepytown, the latter composed of single family residences with a marketplace separated and placed downtown.
A Marxian approach to the spatial production here is animated by a phenomenological interpretation of bodies, in motion and at rest, communicating in active and tacit ways how residents perceive this place. To the extent that this is a specific place in a specific part of a specific country, this spatial and phenomenological lens amounts to a cultural expression as learned by an outsider from a different place in a different country. To this extent then, the excursion here also is a personal and temporally specific account of the experience of not knowing these natural boundaries and traversing them freely and ignorantly during the initial months of fieldwork.

**You already know: Being “Out here”**

Saleem walked up, interrupting any response I was about to make to Rahim’s brief training session on body positioning and awareness. Rahim and Saleem slapped palms and embraced, their clasped fists pressing into each other’s chests as they bumped shoulders. They snapped fingers as they separated. This mode of greeting was becoming familiar to me, though it would be another year before I was included in its universe to any meaningful extent. The “fist bump” was a more common greeting for me in this neighborhood, where I was still a relative stranger. A bump of fist to fist as the phrase indicates, it variously signified unfamiliarity, polite acknowledgment, social distance; even uncertainty, and incipient or fading antagonism. Subtle gradations in these significations could be expressed by how much further away to their side someone held out the fist (within obvious bodily limits; no one bumped fists with their arm all the way out to the side). Yet, a fist bump was not disrespectful, as a complete absence of acknowledgment might be. Disrespect through lack of acknowledgment is a local category that applies to all those who have lived here and are aware of each other. There
are gradations within lack of acknowledgment as well, depending on whether disrespect is being actively conveyed. After the few months it took for people to know who I was, at least for one person this was our daily relation for the three years I lived here. In other cases, disrespect may not be actively conveyed and merely stem from indifference; since I was an outsider, many people were simply disinterested in me and my research. Separately, people nod to each other as they pass on the street while the other option—no eye contact, no nod—is also available; these forms of transient acknowledgment and social exchange generally included me indiscriminately. Over time I was able to gauge quite accurately whether indifference, disrespect, or nothing was being conveyed in these bodily and gestural communications when I was one of the two parties to the exchange, though I will be unable to explain in words how I learned this or how I became proficient at “doing” this.

True to form, Saleem ignored me for the time being although I had to make room for him next to Rahim. This was his habit when someone else was around. Saleem naturally projected an exuberant, “devil may care” attitude to what people might think. Not that he tried to exude aggression or menace, but if anybody had a problem with something he said or did, they were welcome to discuss it with him, his words backed by a well honed physique. Most people were likely to assume he owned objects of aggression entirely more sinister than his fists, although in truth I never saw anything of the sort. Doubtless this invisibility only contributed to the perception of unpredictable danger from such unseen objects. This eventually caused him difficulties. So, unlike many others who were unsure about why I would be in this place and maintaining a circumspect reserve as a consequence, Saleem took to me very early and was openly
friendly. Still, there was always a little distance in his demeanor towards me in situations like these. Perhaps he was affected by the wariness and reticence of others around me, their questions about who I was and why Saleem spent time with me.

It was a chilly evening, and all three of us hunkered down in our jackets. The sidewalk was typically busy now as people came back from work, the evening bustle of activity ratcheting up before it slowed down again after 8-9 p.m. Conversation hit a lull as a procession of characters distracted all three of us in different ways. Flo walked past us in her inimitable dance-along manner. She raised her arm and threw it out from the elbow, waving to her sister Mabel who was across the street leaning on a Rubbermaid wringer, all eighty pounds of her concerted into getting the water out of the mop. Mabel was finishing her “shift,” cleaning up the floor of the deli across the street and taking out the garbage, services for which she got five dollars a day, and a couple of loose cigarettes. She ignored Flo, but Flo did not care. She kept on walking, down the sidewalk, past the storefront church, the dry clean store, and the hair salon which is also a barbershop now, into the liquor store, “the LQ,” her favorite place at this time of day. If I had kept looking, a few minutes later I would have seen her walk out with a can in a black polythene bag, top already popped, swigging in contentment.

“What’s good with you man,” Rahim was asking Saleem as I returned from the thoughts that flashed by in a few seconds. “You already know,” said Saleem with characteristic bravado, before slowing down. “You already know,” or “you already” was a way of signifying that there was nothing to be said, the listener need not be told what is going on with the speaker; the speaker’s life was already well known. The speaker had “profile,” he was known well; people followed his “moves,” what he did, and one need
not guess; he was known by his name. You already knew what he was about and what he might be doing at any given time, which was living the life he wanted to live, nothing more needed to be said.

To slow down this bravado and restrain himself (something he rarely felt the need to do in front of anyone), very deliberately, Saleem calmed his shoulders and hands by putting one inside his jacket pocket, and said, “I’m out here, you know.” He swept the sidewalk, the street, and the other side with a beer-holding hand, indexing everything he meant. Now the word “know” took on a different character. Rahim “already knew,” but he knew something that could not be denied or effaced by sheer bravado. “Know” now signified Saleem’s squandered potential, his spiral away from sport as an opportunity for upward mobility, something Rahim knew all too well, better than many others. They both fell silent and looked away from each other for a moment.

One or the other (and sometimes someone else) usually broke the silence before it lasted too long, with speech or a movement. This time, Saleem spat before he looked back towards Rahim, and in a sympathetic physical reflex that I only realized as I had made it already, I spat too. This distracted him from Rahim. I spat with the force of air behind the saliva, while he provided the motor force with his tongue, looking down. Naturally, this meant mine landed further, compelling him to spit again, head up and neck throwing forward as he did, trying to gain more distance than me. This impromptu competition ended as soon as it had begun, because I did not spit again to reciprocate the challenge.

It was not new, this moment of silence and looking away between the two. Even I had seen it before. Once, I saw it when Saleem came to a high school football game after
not being seen in the neighborhood for almost six weeks. Saleem came over to Rahim to say goodbye before leaving the stadium. He told Rahim he had come because he wanted to “give love,” that is, to appreciate Rahim and his son by making an appearance, to present and join his body to the audience watching the spectacle, especially the smaller group out of the larger audience for whom Rahim’s son’s performance was the spectacle. He spent a few minutes talking to Rahim about a young man who was making the news playing football for another school. “I’m going to get a t-shirt made with their names.” He wanted to inscribe their names on fabric, and wear them, present them to others physically. There were a few more exultations, Saleem the failed footballer talking about other footballers who were where he had been, at that moment when potential is being recognized and hope rising in spite of itself. Hope that this potential will be recognized by those who matter, nurtured and thus realized: in money, success, and fame. Then the moment of silence was there again, weighing down the moment without needing to be spoken about. The time for “speaking” about it was almost a decade ago, and had now passed. The story was part of the tapestry of Saleem’s persona—the guy who could have made it.  

Saleem had also once been on the way to potential stardom. “One of the best Kart, one of the best,” Rahim told me once. Others echoed these words, none more so than Saleem himself, but I believed Rahim. This is what that moment of looking away between them always harkened back to, the potential, the college scholarship, and then the jail time Saleem did, and the slow but sure dissipation of the dream.

78 see chapter 5 for more on Saleem.
No one could explain it. Saleem’s mother and stepfather were both working at steady jobs, with good salaries, and health and retirement benefits. They had put him through school, where he broke most records, and it was no surprise when he was scouted and offered a sports scholarship to a college in upstate New York. His younger cousins told me, “the Saleem you know... is the same Saleem we know!” referring to his perennial exuberance, his interest and lack of interest in too many things. Throughout school he was constantly coming back from “juvi,” (detention center, also referred to as “The Hut”) for getting in trouble. Michael and Eva ran the local deli, where I would hang out, and had seen him grow up here. It was the same, they could not explain it. “Some of them just turn out this way,” said Michael.

They started to talk about the last football game at a local high school. Rahim’s son played quarterback, and Saleem played the enthusiastic (if intermittent) supporter. “Those receivers are ass,” said Saleem. Rahim and I both had to nod in agreement. We had discussed on car rides back home how Rahim’s son would have way better numbers (statistical output of successful actions during games) if the two wide receivers on his team would catch a few more of the very accurate passes he threw their way.79

“Fuck you know [about football, about Rahim’s son’s numbers], you punju hindu,” Saleem said when he noticed me nod. I had to laugh at how he said “punju hindu,” mixing up regions (Punjab, a state in India), religions (Hinduism) and languages (Punjabi or Hindi) all at the same time. Rahim laughed, “he been to all the games this season man, even the one in Verona,” giving Saleem pause. Still laughing, I said “look up

79 I was new to the sport, and did not know all the rules. Rahim was himself a football coach, so I watched a couple of games before venturing an opinion about the offense. He had nodded approvingly much to my delight, telling me I have a good read on it. I felt a little embarrassed at my delight, because I had been watching and playing sports all my life and the basic principles are not all that different.
your texts man, I told you I can’t be both *Punju* and Hindu.” Our banter was filled with these ethnic references. He often looked up videos from India and played them for me inside the store on Rajinder’s laptop (Rajinder ran the store). He once made a video of himself and a friend, dancing “Indian style” in the store and uploaded it on YouTube. Surprisingly, some of his hand gestures and movements were very well executed and indeed reminiscent of a typically Indian style.

Growing restless again as William passed by, Saleem said goodbye to Rahim. He was about to ignore me again, but I liked to interrupt him in such moments, when he was trying to disavow our friendliness towards each other. I stepped in front of him and forced him to clasp my hand too, and execute the chest bump and the finger snap, all rapidly and poorly before he was on his way. Then he began walking behind William and asked him what’s up. “None of your beeswax,” said William, which made Saleem laugh hard before he took a pull from his bottle and said, “I’m trying to help you,” as he followed William down the sidewalk.

We were both still looking at Saleem following William, and a look of mild confusion came over Rahim’s face. We both knew that William consumed dope. What Rahim might not have heard, (hence the look of confusion), was that William had stopped buying from Saleem ever since Saleem took “leave” for some time from the boulevard corner that was his workplace, having been shot at for “fucking up a

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80 Saleem and I would often “trash-talk” each other during exchanges of text messages on the phone. One of these times, he had asked for a recipe for cooking chicken curry, and at the end I had explained that “Hindu” is a religion, “Punju” refers to a place called Punjab, and Punjabi is a language.  
81 Incidentally, dope refers most commonly to crack cocaine in this neighborhood, but in India it refers to marijuana.
package” around the beginning of the fall. Retreating to his mother’s house further north, Saleem returned in the winter to find most of his regulars getting served by others.

“Saleem was away, so… now he’s back, but…” I explained the rest with a few gestures till Rahim’s brow cleared. He shook his head in jaded disdain, before casually addressing this knowledge asymmetry between us; it was odd that Rahim, a long term resident, should be learning anything about what is going on from me, a stranger barely accepted on the street. “I’m not trying to be out here any more than I need, you know.” I knew, because we had talked about being “out here” before, something I was trying to do. And being out here, amongst other things, involved not standing with one’s back to the boulevard.

**Standing in Line**

The storefront church on the corner ran a food pantry on Friday, so the sidewalk was even busier than usual this evening. Many older men and women, a few with grandchildren in tow walked past with trolleys that served as laundry baskets and food carriers. I stole glances over at the assembled line of people. A few months ago, I had inadvertently annoyed one of the Friday visitors to the church. I was staring absent-mindedly when I realized that one of the visitors thought I was looking straight at him, and proceeded to come over and have it out with me. “What you looking at, you own this fucking store [the store I was standing outside]? Go inside and do your business,” and so on, till he was finished and walked back to their spot in the line.

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82 Short term credit is usually given by the supplier to the retailer (Saleem in this case). Saleem had not been able to return the money in time, and having thus “fucked up the package,” began avoiding his supplier.
The store I was standing outside (which this person assumed I owned or worked in), was run by South Asians. I often stood inside the store as well, causing those who did not know me to assume I worked in the place. While Rajinder, the actual operator of the store was very friendly to me, and always trying to help me meet people, I did not want to be identified with the store. The “picket store,” the other convenience store across the street was much older than the one on this side, and a few people (including Rahim) told me that the South Asians running that place were rude. Residents of houses further inside on the streets that ran like capillaries off this boulevard often asked if I meant the new store or the old one when I told them I hang out often at the store and messages can be left for me there if they cannot get in touch. Many spoke approvingly of Rajinder.

Bewildered at the time by the man’s anger, I realized this was not a moment when anyone wished to be stared at, collecting a little succor from the milk of human kindness that had flown their way. Later I learned that one of the employees at the convenience store also went to the church pantry if she heard they were “giving out something good. You got to have some ID [any valid form of identification], that’s all.”

Standing in line is one of those enforced moments of social encounter. There were two other times I had been in lines that were singular and filled with a strange trepidation. I had accompanied a young man, recently unemployed and an aspiring hip hop artist, to the local municipal department of benefits, commonly known as the Welfare Office. The line snaked around the block on a rainy day, everyone a little moist and the two of us especially so, having walked for about half an hour to get there. Standing in line, and then an embarrassed yet brazen breaking of the line by three men including my interlocutor, appeared to me as a performance given to an absent audience. Everyone shuffled, people
avoided each other’s glances unless they knew each other. At the same time, there were exultations of recognition, friends and acquaintances coincidentally running into each other in what was a periodic stop in daily life. After being checked by security and metal detectors, we went from one window to a basement room. From there to another window and then back in the basement room, waiting. When my friend’s name was called, we went back upstairs to an office and were met by a woman at the door. She was my friend’s case officer, so I expected a conversation, as against the shuffling from line to window to line that we had been engaged in so far. However, the interaction lasted all of 10-15 seconds. She said to us, “I don’t do Tuesdays, come back and get an appointment for another day.” My friend did not say a word and immediately started walking towards the exit, embarrassed and smiling in discomfiture. He asked her no questions, explained nothing of his case that he had told me about on the way over and had mentioned details of at each of the two windows we had been to. After half an hour of walking and an hour of standing, talking at windows and waiting, relieved at being released, he immediately rushed to leave.

I experienced people mutually staring or avoiding eye contact again in a line outside a local Walmart on Black Friday, the night of a shopping extravaganza for heavily discounted products. I had accompanied a friend who lived in Sleepytown and was looking to buy a new Playstation video gaming console that was in stores for the first time and available at a significant discount only for one day. A week after having been to the welfare office, the line at the Walmart was reminiscent of the line at the welfare office. Only here, the air seemed one of impatience mixed with anticipation. The stores were to open at midnight, and we stood outside for little over an hour, as the line
increased behind us, eventually disappearing behind the corner of the huge store. Some were together, talking and discussing details of items they were keen to buy. We could see the employees inside, walking to different parts of the store, presumably getting everything ready for the rush that was about to begin.

A lady gave up and stepped out of the line to leave. She said a few words, talking to the whole crowd in general as she spoke to herself, verbalizing the reasons for her departure from what looked an advantageous spot in the line (it was ahead of us). “I’ll get these again after New Years, my grandkids are just going to have to wait.” Some of the crowd mumbled in commiseration. The sight of the employees through the large glass windows all along of the side of the store and the view of aisles that looked ready to be consumed from was making folks more restless. The door to the store was actually open, people standing in a slightly looser line near the main entrance. Police were standing with a store manager who was waiting to determine if the time had come for people to start rushing in and picking up things before going to the checkout counters and paying for their goods.

Finally, it happened. We felt a surge in front and behind us, and both of us were carried along, without being shoved or pushed, in an insistent press that bulged at the door before releasing into a spray of people on the other side of the entrance. My friend, a member of the COS and married to another member, knew where he was going. We were not too far back in the line, and hoped for a good outcome. It was not to be, however. As we reached the electronics and games aisle, he noticed a young man holding the glossy package with the gaming console he was looking for. “They all out man, they

83 On the COS, see below and chapter 3 and 4.
done, there were only twelve of them,” the young man told my friend without much of a
hint of triumph in his voice. Smiling broadly in disappointment, my friend rounded the
corner and leaned over to see if all the twelve consoles had indeed already been sold. The
shelf was already empty, about four or five minutes after the opening of the store. There
was nothing else for us to do. Smiling in a strange state of deprivation at the culmination
of this moment at the end of standing in line, shuffling forward, looking around and
looking restless, he walked straight to the car, and we were back home in twenty minutes.

A Place with two Spaces

It was the Fall of 2010. I participated in an informal meeting in a private residence
in Sleepytown. This was Stella’s home, where a small group met informally every two
weeks or so to have discussions and share refreshments. In the meeting today, we were
reading from a mass-market paperback about the plasticity of the brain, and the almost
infinite human capacity for change. There were four regular group members, and my
friend and I had been invited. In the cozy and welcoming (but riven with cat hair) dining
room, six of us sat around a table, sipping burnt coffee and enjoying the bread that Victor
always brought from his local bakery in a suburb of the New York Metropolitan Area. I
studiously avoided looking at the yellow, bulb-shaped saltshaker. When I was here the
last time I had committed two follies, serving myself some of Stella’s half cooked
scrambled eggs being the first. Having tasted their atrocious, half cooked and runny
flavor, reaching for the salt to mitigate it was my second mistake. An oily sheen on the
shaker had allowed two cat hairs to stick, producing in me an almost uncontrollable
desire to gag when I noticed them in the middle of my frantic shaking over the eggs.
In time, I got over it, and over time, Stella came to accept that I do not eat scrambled eggs. She had tried my omelets, and moaned in delight whenever she ate “Indian Style” vegetarian dishes that I prepared. It was humorous, sitting and eating with her. The need for performing her love for all things international overrode any actual eating that she did, moaning and exulting before and after every bite, making intentionally politically incorrect jokes about “brown people.” The jokes were not really offensive; just not thought through or delivered well enough to be funny. Stella often finished with leftovers in her plate.

Born and raised by a mother who would not countenance leftovers, I always noticed them before throwing them in the trash and putting the plate in the sink. However, born and raised in India, I could never bring myself to say anything to her about leaving food in the plate because she was older than me. In any case, it was hard not to admire this energetic 72-year-old radical collectivist. Up early and in the gym, then off to her job which she described as “psych nurse,” then organizing some activity around her reading group, distributing pamphlets, attending the Unitarian church, and writing plays when she finally sat down at her desk. She was filled with an energy and optimism that was infectious, and we had a relationship of banter, ribbing each other at every opportunity.

As we discussed the chapter on inherited qualities vs. learned behaviors in the book, I could look at the well appointed street from the window. Trees had that beautiful

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**Ingredients** – two whites of an egg, one egg with yolk, onion, tomato, butter, fresh cilantro, salt, one green chili (“Thai Chilies” at Whole Foods, “chilies” at any Indian grocery in Jersey City, Edison, Woodbridge, or Rt. 27); three spoons of whole milk, cheese and green/red peppers optional. Fry the chili, onions and tomatoes in butter, put them into the stirred egg, add salt and pour back onto the pan. Pour chopped cilantro on as it cooks, and then toss and cook the other side till golden. Toast rye bread, serve with Florida’s Natural orange juice. Follow up with *chai*. Nap afterwards if possible.
fall quality native to temperate climates; clean and well maintained sidewalks punctuated by gaslights gave the dusk a romantic glow; second cars stood tucked into driveways as a few automatic sprinklers watered the lawns in front of pretty single-family homes, each household seamlessly maintaining its part of the sidewalk that lined the whole street. Once the discussion concluded, I asked Stella to take my friend and me on a walk around the neighborhood.

“My street is a good street,” Stella began as she walked us from the end of the street where her house stood, extolling the virtues of her neighborhood and her neighbors. “Unfortunately there are a few homes that have been left,” and I was struck by the tenderness with which she referred to the “left” homes, emptied by foreclosures that had afflicted the street after the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007-08. Squirrels ran past, a light breeze ruffled our shirts, and as we walked, the strain of sitting in discussion for two hours slowly left my body.

As we passed another house with small decorative lights lining the garden, she mentioned the street one block over to the right, which had been gated recently. “Yeah, they decided a few years ago that everyone must have a key to get in… I don’t like that.” We passed Nina, who I did not know yet, and Stella called out loudly across the street. Walking her neighbor’s dog, Nina turned with a smile and said “hello” to us. “She is the queen of the street,” said Stella, making Nina break out in peals of laughter. “Don’t you see the crown on my head?!”

Talking and walking in this way, we reached the other end, which ran perpendicular to the long boulevard that ran from Sleepytown into RapCity on the left at

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\( ^{85} \) Nina’s own dog, whose life history I collected, had passed a year ago.
the edge of the street. Stella turned around at the intersection of her street with the Boulevard—as if to bodily define her own space, tracing an ideal gated community of her own—and started walking back to her home. Craning our necks and seeing some buildings on the boulevard along the left, my friend and I paused in curiosity. There was a noticeable difference between the street we had just walked on, and the view from the corner just a block away to our left. It was a busy intersection, with many stores, people coming out of stores, a bus making a U-turn, and some clusters of men standing around and talking. Music was blaring out of a parked car. There was a liquor store near us, along with a hair salon. Stella had kept walking, but now turned and looked inquisitively at the two of us.

“What’s over there, looks like the busy part of your neighborhood,” my friend asked. “Oh? Oh that’s nothing,” she said with a downward arc of her hand, a shake of the head, body turning back again towards the direction of her house, as it was before she noticed we had stopped at the corner and turned to look at us. “That’s a whole other city, RapCity begins there. I lived there for a while.” We took a couple more seconds to look but it was apparent that Stella was ready to walk back, so we joined her again. She picked up where she had left off on the niceties and travails of her community, and how no behavior is innate, everything is learned, and human beings have an infinite capacity to change themselves, their future, and their life.

We walked back to her home and Stella invited us to stay for early evening drinks and more snacks. We did not want to impose, unsure if they had planned for us, but she said there is enough for everyone. I would learn that impromptu invitation was typical of her generosity. Her husband Doug, an artist and photographer, also joined us. “Here’s
your joker,” she taunted Doug humorously as he came down. Doug did not participate in these informal meetings, and had told me in Stella’s presence that he was pleasantly surprised to hear some laughter downstairs the few times I had attended. We settled down in the living room adjacent to where we had our informal discussions, and began to chat about this and that. Things were interrupted when I declined a second glass of wine because it often caused me a headache. Finding no beers for me in the fridge, Stella asked Doug if he would go get some. I protested but Doug waved me off and told me to join him.

“Never walk when you can drive!”
Noticing that he was reaching for the car keys hanging off a big wooden lock with hooks that was pinned on the wall, I mentioned that there seemed to be a liquor store around the corner. Stella told me her ex-husband Roger used to say “never walk when you can drive,” and we walked to the car together. Still, I was wondering why we were getting in Doug’s jeep to go and get some beer when the liquor store was right there. We drove down the road, and turned right, away from the liquor store on the boulevard. Surprised again, I said, “but there’s one right here, I don’t want anything fancy.” He looked over slowly, through the window in the general direction of the store and then back at me, and crinkled one side of his face as he mumbled, “mmmphhh,” and then a gesture with his hand accompanied with another sound that together seemed placating and relaxed at the same time, something like an “it’s alright.” We went to another store in a small township nearby, a short drive of seven-eight minutes. We returned and the evening ended after another hour.
In the summer of the next year (2011), I moved in to a spacious apartment with wooden flooring and higher-than-usual ceilings in RapCity. As well as regularly attending the informal meetings in Stella’s home two blocks away, I had made acquaintances on this side of the municipal boundary, the place where I “hung out” everyday. It was a few months later that Rahim was perturbed by the way I stood and impelled to comment.

What might be happening on these two sides, spaces that come into being through, and are defined by, bodies that act? What is Rahim’s tacit bodily knowledge producing, what is Stella’s turn expressing, how is what I call the invisible door created by these bodies that act, and which in turn becomes the horizon of these bodies and their projects?

In “The Production of Space,” Henri Lefebvre makes an intervention in the conception of space that treats it as an abstract, universal, and empty container of social life. Lefebvre begins with a triad of (1) physical (2) mental and (3) social space. Not strictly corresponding to these three (physical space, that given by nature, is slowly disappearing), is another conceptual triad: (1) Spatial practice is that which, in any given society, “secretes that society's space,” crystallized in the daily routine, and in “the routes and networks which link up the places set aside for work, ‘private’ life and leisure.” (1991:38). (2) Representations of space refer to conceptualized space, that of planners and architects, and technocrats, and; (3) Representational spaces refer to “space as directly lived though its associated images and symbols.” (39) Representational space is different from spatial practice because spatial practice emerges from propositions made about spatial practice as it emerges, indicating a dialectical relation between social ideas
and the practice they create; whereas representational spaces are, so to speak, the most ethnographic, that is, spaces as lived by people.

In turn, spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space to the body in social practice are related to each other via another triad: (1) Perceived space, the practical apprehension and “use” of space, the basis and outcome of social practice. (2) Conceived space is space as formulated by the technocratic experts of a regime, the space planned as an element of architecture, urban planning, and engineering. This element of the triad cleaves most closely to the abstract, universal, empty conception of space, space as merely physical, a potentiality of exploitation for human inhabitation and movement. This is the “dominant space in any society (or mode of production).” (39) This conception of universality and neutrality is ideological, having political uses and serving the powerful. (3) Lived spaces are spaces as experienced by inhabitants. “This is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate.” (39)

The two triads—spatial practice, representations of space, representational spaces; perceived space, conceived space, lived space—correspond more closely to each other

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86 In its affective dimension, lived space corresponds in some aspects with the idea of place, when place is considered as the binary opposite of space – that which human beings create in space, through social relations, feelings of attachment, places that mean something to a person as opposed to impersonal, abstract and universal space. In this sense, it approximates what Doreen Massey (1991) refers to when calling place a “constellation of social relations” (24), and which she seeks to rescue from its subordinate relation to space by arguing for a “global sense of place” (29). I am attempting something different in this chapter, in arguing for a space produced by the body, phenomenally (and not a place produced by emotions or relations and then articulated intellectually).

Theories of social practice that examine how social structures are reproduced by the practices of people make a related claim about bodies and social practice. Pierre Bourdieu, a pioneer and one of the most well known practitioners of this approach, was also influenced by phenomenology in his development of ideas about the habitus, the social field, and people’s stable dispositional structures that produce action structured by those very structures of power they reproduce.
than either do to the first (physical, mental and social space).\textsuperscript{87} Perceived space, or spatial practice, occurs in space as represented and conceived. From this practice arises representational space or the lived experience of space, which is the marginal outcome of spatial practice in conceived space. This lived experience of space became apparent when something “natural” was interrupted by an outsider who stood incorrectly on the sidewalk in RapCity and wanted to walk further than the turn on the edge of the street in Sleepytown: Rahim’s technique of standing and Stella’s turn at the corner of the street, her production of the boundary of her neighborhood, her “good street.” What does the body in the world perceive, what does it know without “knowing” before it is told what it knows, before its experience is conceived and explained?

\textbf{The Body’s knowledge}

We do not need to “think” when opening the door to a house we live in for many years, or turning on the light in a familiar part of this house. Rahim simply stood in the correct way on the sidewalk in the evening, not thinking about it until I stood in a way that was not correct. While he continued to speak to me he was disturbed, seeking out the source of this disturbance, this interruption. It finally came to his conscious realization, eliciting the line that inaugurated the first section of this chapter. “You’ve been standing with your back to the ave for a while.” Stella turned at the end of the street without a thought given to this act, her project of showing us around her neighborhood completed. Only with our out-of-place bodies stopped at the end of the street, and my friend’s inquiry about “what is over there” was Stella interrupted enough to think what went without thinking, her bodily definition of her neighborhood. Once interrupted by my

\textsuperscript{87} One reason for this lack of correspondence may be that spatial practice has come to be defined primarily as urban spatial practice under “neocapitalism” (Lefebvre’s term for the current stage of capitalism), while the countryside is relegated to the periphery.
position while standing in his usual way, Rahim was impelled to speak, realizing I was
doing something he habitually does not, and that I, as his friend should not do either.
Once interrupted by us, Stella articulated a few words and a gesture. My friend’s question
elicited an abbreviated and incoherent answer because he asked what she had already said
with her turn. Now, compelled to think about what she did without thinking, she could
only muster a half-hearted, cryptic, and inchoate response with words and another
gesture, of “what is over there.”

As I returned to that moment much later, having lived in RapCity for six months
and learned more about Stella, the moment gave me pause. How should I square her
global notions of inclusive progress with her seeming dismissal of neighbors just a few
feet away? Was “that”—the street, the buildings, the people—“nothing”? Was it empty of
the qualities she described for her street, and of the qualities she ascribed to all humans?
A void where nothing she said applied or mattered? Was she simply a prejudiced white
woman in spite of all her life living in and around RapCity, working as a school nurse in
the public school system there? In spite, even, of her radical leftist activist views, her
presentations on how capitalism is racist, her advocacy for detained undocumented
immigrants? It just could not be so simple. There were many places for her to live, and all
residents bar one couple (who was about to move out) on her street were also black folk.

While the seemingly dismissive downward arc of her hand seemed more
significant initially, I realized that it was the automatic, natural, completely
unselfconscious turn at the corner that truly defined Stella’s phenomenal relation to the
space around her house and her embodied organization of the boundaries of “her”
neighborhood. I realized that to fall easily into the way of thinking of her through her
skin color, I was risking an easy categorization at the expense of truly learning something about what it meant to live here, on this specific street, in relation to municipal boundaries and a historically evolved built environment, a specific conception and representation of space. Stella and Rahim’s spatial practices showed how space is structured invisibly, and the invisibility of these structures can only become visible through the body.

I was afforded an opportunity to observe a discussion about these conceived boundaries, these representations of space. In the summer of 2012, Residents of Stella’s street were called to a meeting of the moribund Block Association by Nina, the outgoing President and the lady who Stella had called the “queen of the street.” I had developed a routine of meeting Nina every week for a session of tea and conversation in her home. She asked me to join the meeting of the Block Association. Immersed in other routines and conversations, this meeting brought to the fore residents’ ambivalent relation to those living on the the other side of an invisible, yet all too visible door.

**These Knuckleheads over Here**

I shared my frustrations with Rahim one afternoon as we sipped *chai* in my house, struggling to make much headway in building rapport on the street (“you be *my* psych now,” I told Rahim, who had gotten used to joking with his wife about ‘going to meet his psych’ whenever he came over to my apartment for *chai*, cookies and interviewing or simply talking).

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88 Ingredients: Raw ginger, sugar, milk, cardamom, orange pekoe tea leaves. Boil water with fresh crushed ginger, add tea leaves and crushed cardamom when it comes to a boil. Add milk, boil again. Add sugar to taste.
“These knuckleheads\textsuperscript{89} are just an interruption to your lunch break man, why you care about them.” Rahim just could not fathom why I would have any interest in talking to “street guys,” men working in the informal economy of the street. I tried to explain, but he only shook his head, repeating his advice that I’d be better off talking to those that “have some sense” and are willing to talk to me. I had given up on launching into progressive defenses about discrimination in policing and incarceration practices with Rahim. For one, they seemed unproductive, eliciting only a nod or some kind of disinterested platitude. Second, Rahim knew all this better than me, without needing to know any statistics or arguments about the punitive and racial biases of the system. He had been processed by that waste management system of mass incarceration, and after many personal struggles against heavy odds, turned it around. Now he coached in the Pee Wee league, trying to get kids to learn about training and teamwork, and trying (often in vain) to make parents understand that winning was not the important thing at this age (although his team won regularly), learning the game and building discipline was.

The irony in his sympathetic dismissal of my attempts was that Rahim had been “G” himself, a so called gangster back in the day, running three crews in different parts of the city even as he coached football to young children. Knuckleheads: It spoke to Rahim’s own perception and his plans for the future. He had only moved “up the hill” to this street to get away from further down the boulevard where violence and illegal activity were much worse. Rahim’s aspirations of upward mobility included separating himself from “knuckleheads.” Yet, Rahim was aware of his own past, his work in the

\textsuperscript{89}“Knucklehead”: knucklehead |ˈnəklˌhed| noun informal “a stupid person.” \textit{New Oxford American Dictionary}

Rahim was the only one on this side of the invisible door who used this word, “knuckleheads.” I heard it again only in Sleepytown (see below).
illegal economy, and the stigma that might have attached to the same term, which included him in its purview not too many years ago.

Rahim had seen too much of this life for me to talk this “bookish talk” to him. Having made his way out of the criminal justice system, he worked at a hotel as a technician, handling the maintenance of the heating and cooling systems for all rooms. He took independent jobs on the side as a heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) technician. He loved air conditioning systems, knew them inside out, and told me he ‘talked to’ every piece of equipment he was hired to install. Now, having saved up some money, he was looking to buy some properties, seeking to profit from a mortgage market whose bottom had fallen out in 2008. Rahim wanted to own ten properties in the next ten years and then “fall back,” retire. He had begun well at seeking out the opportunities offered by the subprime crisis, with two properties purchased and rented out already.

Rahim’s interest apart, in general the subprime mortgage crisis and the ensuing Great Recession did not excite the imagination or incite much reaction in RapCity. People shrugged with a jaded eloquence when I asked about the crisis and recession. “What crisis man, things weren’t so good here before, we’re used to scrambling” was a common refrain, and I always felt I understood immediately even though I was new to the place. But I also always felt disoriented by this refrain and my understanding. In fact, the built environment changed significantly in RapCity. Five new stores opened around the corner where I lived, showing a surprising dynamism in new business activity. The convenience store we were standing outside had opened a year ago, a Subway food outlet was in the offing, and a new Jamaican restaurant had recently opened.
So, counterintuitively, it was easier to talk about the financial crisis in RapCity, where it had little daily significance. In contrast, just a block over from where we sat in RapCity, no one shrugged when I asked the question. In fact, a block over, I had to be careful about broaching the subject of the impact of the crisis. Families in Sleepytown were much troubled by the opaque movements of finance that in one fell swoop had decimated their mortgage values, wiped out earnings from investments and bit chunks off the investments themselves, and thrown into disarray planning for life events such as children’s education or retirement. The financial crisis and recession was a daily source of concern for them, and they tried to come together again to see what they could do. Searching for concrete points of action while the remote world of virtual markets offered none, they turned to their neighborhood, and to what was “over there,” on the other side of the invisible door.

**Those Knuckleheads over There**

Lemonade and chips were arranged on a plastic table in the front yard of Nina’s home. People were smiling and chatting as they settled down and arranged their chairs into a circle. This was May in 2012, and it had been two years since the last meeting of the Block Association. Nina began by taking attendance and pointing out how long it had been since this voluntary body came together to discuss their shared life in this place. There was clearly an underlying concern for the meeting to finally happen again after such a long hiatus. I did not know most of the attendees other than recognizing a few of them from sight, having seen them briefly pass by in a car or walking to their homes as I attended our informal meetings at Stella’s home, or came to see Nina as I did every week. No agenda had been handed out, but discussions began almost immediately. I began to
catch up as one of the attendees said, “We are the West over here,” invoking the frontier. “We’re a buffer zone,” chimed in another. “We are too close to RapCity, we’re a playground for them.”

A middle-aged man, already quite aggravated although the meeting had only just begun, spoke for a few minutes about how much more taxes he paid on property as compared to RapCity (the difference was $8,000), how he regularly saw people walking around and was certain they were “casing, they are casing the place,” implying they were doing a reconnaissance of the street before planning some kind of illegal activity (a break-in, a robbery, theft of a car). He felt that residents of streets further away from RapCity led a much quieter life. Someone interjected that “they [thieves, or criminals; or some of the people next door] are stupid, they just assume we have money.” “We should have taken matters into our own hands, blocked the street off,” the middle-aged man concluded, reminding me of when Stella had mentioned a street close by whose residents had done exactly that.

Conversation became scattered again as mentions of car-theft and young men “casing” the street set off expressions of concern at what might happen next. It was somewhere in this medley of voices that one man began to speak, and as he continued, the voices died down. He was not looking at anyone, eyes lowered to a spot some feet in front of himself. Early every morning, he had to move a taxi that he was operating out of the way, take out his own car, and then move his wife’s car to the side of the street before parking the other two cars in the driveway, so that she could drive to work an hour or so later. It was on one of these days that the incident he was describing occurred. Everyone sat and waited, glancing at each other. It seemed that some were perplexed at how he had
managed to take the floor. He was telling a story and was not talking to anyone in particular.

From his accent, I could guess he was from the Caribbean. Still not looking at anyone in particular, just at the spot in front of him, he slowly drifted into a reverie as he described with pleasure what happened one day when he saw some “boys” outside his house.

I saw them outside, and I started to look. They just standing there! They were not doing anything, but they are outside my house [smiled]. So I keep looking. I’m in the kitchen, making my coffee, because I did not want to sleep any more. I see them looking at my cars, at my house, and talking. I get angry, but I keep quiet and keep looking. Then I walked out, from my back door. But I’m not going to go just like that, to talk to them? What if they have something? That is why I went to the back door, I keep my machete there [he paused, smiled and looked around for the first time. A couple of people shifted a little, most were impassive]. It’s still dark, sun is not out. I put on my jacket, and I start walking. I go around the house, I have my machete [smiling with pleasure now], and they see me, these boys. They standing, so I let my hand out [showed how he moved it a little away from his body], and they see it, the long blade.

Now they are running! Ha ha ha ha, they all run off! Whenever I go out, early or late, I carry it [the machete] now. These boys not walking on me.

It seemed I was the only one fascinated. Others listened impassively, or shifted uncomfortably, especially the elegantly dressed lady who lives two houses down from Nina. Nina had told me this lady originally hails from Haiti when we noticed her walking towards her house one day when I was on my weekly visit to Nina’s house. She scowled only once during the whole meeting, and it was when this gentleman told his story.

Perhaps no one really wanted to listen to this, disinterested in the story itself or uninterested in such individualized models of self-help in the collective voluntary endeavor that is a Block Association meeting. They all quietly waited for the man to
finish. When he leaned back, glowing in satisfaction at sharing his story, the other attendees moved on without comment.

The traffic to and from a hospital nearby often diverted on to the street in the morning, because of a roadblock on the main street, or excessive traffic. This temporarily turned the quiet residential street into a thoroughfare. The noise pollution was too much for some of the retired folk living here, and they spoke about how making the street a “one way” might be a good solution to reduce the flow of traffic. Others spoke of the gaslights being too dim at night, how cutting down some of the trees on the street might help, and that people should consider leaving their living room lights on at night.

In a general state of annoyance and frustration, some of the attending residents started conversing about how they should have taken the opportunity to have their street blocked off as well when the issue was discussed a few years ago and it seemed there was a chance to do so. The last time these neighbors of RapCity had some momentum to create changes in the built environment, they had managed to get high speed bumps built at regular intervals on the street. The goal was to slow traffic down so that any pedestrians (there were almost none) but especially residents and children would be safe from speeding cars. Although the phenomenon of car theft had steadily declined since the mid-nineties, they also wanted to send out a signal to those who stole cars and got involved in chases with the police. This change had the effect of slowing down the traffic, but added to the noise pollution that was disturbing some residents.

Everyone wanted more now. Someone mentioned that they knew the local chief of police through a personal connection, and people recommended that they activate this connection to have a meeting with him, and draw his attention to issues of safety and
excessive movement of strangers through their street. Another suggested that presenting
statistics on crime will make their case stronger. With an angry wave of arm and finger
pointed in the direction of RapCity, a resident concluded that “We have to find a way to
handle those knuckleheads over there.”90 He was weary of having to worry about his car
and house all the time. Again, with words and gestures towards “over there,” residents
filled RapCity with signifiers of their own.

There were 17 people in attendance. One of the younger couples attending the
meeting was of Caucasian extraction. They were both professionals working in New
York City. As they made a comment, joining in the discussion, one woman spoke to them
and the crowd in general. She reaffirmed that this was not a bad block, and folks should
not be deterred from living here. “Oh, we are about to move next month,” said the man
with a smile. This deflating moment had the effect of turning the conversation inwards.
The Block Association Secretary raised the question of cleanliness, talking politely about
litter on the sidewalk and ‘maintaining our own front yards,’ and mumbling about
property maintenance, about certain standards that must be maintained to secure property
values. Association members began to point out what they saw as specific issues with
different houses. The grass was four feet high in the front of one house. Skunks,
hedgehogs and raccoons had been sighted, one raccoon having bit off the top of the

90 It is necessary to note that even though many people might refer to the streets next to where I sat today as
“the hood” or characterize it as the ghetto, this is not an accurate but a stereotyped characterization. The
ghetto or “hyperghetto” as understood today existed further down the road. Nonetheless, even residents
from capillary streets off the main Boulevard in RapCity would often make this blanket characterization of
the corner, reflecting the sweep of a broad brush that paints all areas with any street activity the same color.
Nonetheless, accurate or not, the concerns of these residents reflect an attempted strategy to counteract a
“blemish of place… [where] the acute sense of social indignity that enshrouds neighbourhoods of relegation
can be attenuated only by thrusting the stigma onto a faceless, demonized other – the downstairs
neighbours, the immigrant family dwelling in an adjacent building, the youths from across the street who
‘do drugs’ or are engaged in street ‘hustling,’ or the residents over on the next block whom one suspects of
illegally drawing unemployment or welfare support. This logic of lateral denigration and mutual
distanciation… is difficult to check” (Wacquant 2007:67-68).
garbage bin of a resident. Recently, someone had seen deer jump over their fence. Nobody mentioned any concerns with the houses of any other attendee at the meeting.

Garbage on the street vexed some of the residents, making visible expressions of disgust at the fact that this new phenomenon had emerged on their street. Also, some people were now parking their cars on the street and not in their driveways. As another woman commented, “that’s tacky, it’s trifling,” the lady from Haiti glared pointedly at the man who had told the story which everyone listened to but did not comment on. I had learned in RapCity about the tension between African Americans and non-African American black folk. It was quite palpable there, and many had spoken without hesitation about it. Of the 17 participants at the meeting here in Sleepytown, barring the Caucasian couple and the lady from Haiti and the man from the Caribbean, all others were African American.91

I wondered about this dynamic between the two of them: she had seemed visibly ill-at-ease when he recounted his story of the boys and the machete, while others sat impassively, waiting for him to conclude. And there was no doubting her sharp look at the same man when the issues of garbage and cars parked on the street were discussed in quick succession. Later, when the meeting wound up, no one seemed to interact with this man. The Haitian lady’s discomfort with him drew me in this regard. As the only other non-African American person (and ethnically proximate to this man) there, did she feel embarrassed by his seemingly aimless meandering, his parking on the side of the street, while everyone else was trying to get on with the fraught business of maintaining their mortgage values already gutted by the subprime crisis, reviving the Block Association, 91 This is not a random speculation; over the course of living here for almost a year and talking to different people, I learned to make this differentiation with a great degree of accuracy.
dealing with “those knuckleheads,” and in general contending with being “the last in Sleepytown?”

At a yard sale deeper inside Sleepytown that summer, I had bought a painting from a 55-year-old homeowner and had a brief conversation with her about my research on the seam line dividing RapCity and Sleepytown. She spoke about how she had spent little time in that area although it was close by, her perambulatory circle from work to home and her social life creating few chances to do so. “I do know this. They always say, ‘would you rather be the first in RapCity, or the last in Sleepytown?’” She laughed enigmatically as I asked what the answer was, and said it depended who you asked. Her own answer? “Oh, I’m fine where I live, I like it here.”

This stark enunciation of a spatial imaginary—a division that I had learned about from the bodily hexis of various interlocutors when these boundaries were still unfamiliar to me—brought the division between these two spaces in one place sharply into focus.

An Impasse

Finally, some residents had a brief discussion about turning down the volume whenever having a party or get-together, but letting each other have fun on Friday and Saturday. Someone suggested creating a Facebook page for the Block Association, one member handed a $10 contribution to Nina before leaving, and the meeting came to an end. We started picking up chairs and collecting the rather substantial amount of garbage that had been produced in the last hour; paper cups and plates, half empty bags of chips, lemonade bottles and so on. It was not clear if a new President and Secretary would be
elected, or when. As I asked Nina about this while we cleared the tables and chairs, she only sighed.

Once we had finished cleaning up, Nina insisted on driving me to my apartment because it was getting dark. I found it somewhat preposterous, because my apartment was two blocks over, but complied. We got into the car and buckled the seatbelts. She backed it out of her driveway with an effortless facility born of habit, and sat almost pinned against the steering, peering over the wheel as she turned the car and drove towards my street. “I don’t like to drive much, traffic on the highway is just so aggressive,” she had told me another time on a trip to the town where she had been raised. Used to sitting next to her in the passenger seat, as I had done often on trips to the library, I looked at her glancing left and right but only with her eyes, her neck very still, concentrating. Usually she would lean back a little once she started talking, but today she remained as she was, responding in monosyllables to my small talk. A minute or so later, we were at my apartment. She kept looking forward and did not reach over as she usually does when we hug and kiss goodbye, making the whole thing a rather stiff exercise. “Give me a call when you get home,” I joked. Nina was still looking forward.

My apartment had an entrance on the sidewalk, and the doorway to the stairs was a few feet further inside. I got out of the car, walked around the back of it, and stood waiting on the sidewalk till she left the street. She sat there, both hands on top of the wheel and still looking straight ahead. I leaned closer and knocked on the window. Startled by the knock, rolling down the window with a smile and nervous giggle, Nina said, “Oh, I was waiting to see you got inside.” I laughed back, “Oh, I was waiting for you!”
Nina and me usually met once every week after lunch. Except one other time a year later, Nina never drove or walked over to my side of the neighborhood. She had not even considered dropping me until the day of the Block Association meeting, until we were both outside her house, it was evening and she realized that I was going back “there.” Then, we stood in mutual confusion till I asked her why she was waiting. A little startled as she giggled and said the reason for her waiting there, hands on the wheel and looking ahead, it seemed to convey: ‘obviously I am waiting for you to go inside. Isn’t that obvious? Why else would I wait here? Isn’t it also obvious that I am waiting here, now and in this space, when I rarely pause to close the door and let you walk away when you visit me in my home (although I know that you are walking “there,” to this space that both of us are in right now)? It is because I am in this space, that I must wait.’

So I took out the key, opened the entrance and turned back to see Nina already turning on to the boulevard. In just a few seconds, she would be at the stop light, which I could see was green. A moment later she would turn on to her street, her journey home complete before I walked up the two flights of stairs to my apartment. We had knowingly exchanged attention, and unknowingly exchanged protection until we both realized why we were frozen in place. Now we were both safe.

In fact, one might consider if Nina’s perplexion should have revealed to me what my body was doing as well, standing, waiting for her to leave, move out of this space, which she had come into because I needed to be dropped home. And what was to guarantee she would make it down the boulevard and back to her house? Should I not have followed her home to ensure she did not have an accident? Why was I interested in

92 See chapter 5.
waiting only for her to leave my street, the space I lived in, and whose prescribed bodily hexis I had learned? Or was it a different habit? All my life I have waited until guests have driven away, or walked down the staircase of our house and out of sight, before closing the door. I learned this standing and watching with my parents when I was younger, and once I was old enough to receive guests of my own accord, I habitually waited like this until they had left.

**The body in the world, The body in motion**

The French phenomenologist philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) asserted an approach to philosophy that refused the separation of humans from the world. Being is always ‘being with,’ and has no meaning outside this ‘with.’ The world does not exist independent of the individual, and more importantly, the individual always already “comes with” the world. Our bodies have a tacit sense of being in the world. While this sense contains our experiences, it derives first and foremost from human beings as bodies, as bodies in the world, and as bodies that act. The primacy given to the body was a historical intervention against empiricist and intellectualist theories of knowledge.93 Theories of phenomenology contest both ideas: that knowledge is produced by a “correct” perception of an extant reality or through conscious representation via the mental synthesis of worldly elements. Instead, for phenomenology, “the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins” (Merleau-Ponty 1962b:vii). Rather than taking the objective world for granted, phenomenology focuses on an embodied experience of

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93 Briefly, empiricism is the idea that objects are discrete entities in the world that subjects must correctly perceive, while intellectualism is the view that it is the human mind that produces perception by putting together things in the world. In the former view, the world impinges on us and produces consciousness, while consciousness constitutes the world in the latter approach.
the world, the very experience empiricist and intellectualist approaches are built on and seek to account for, without recognizing this origin.

This is not to say that the body lacks history, or that what Lefebvre called representational or lived spaces (the experience of space) are not connected to conceived representations of space created by the state and its organs. The search is not for a “lost” experience, but rather, for an understanding of how the body is fundamental to experience as a unity not disaggregated into component parts supplying sensory data to a central processing system in the brain. In turn, this experience is prior to theories of knowledge about it. Rahim and Stella were not natives in their natural habitat who did not know what they did and simply did it. Rather, they did not carry what they did as a script in their minds, prepared to be read out to whoever wanted to know. Instead, they carried an experience, a space, and a history in their bodies. Nina was waiting at the wheel, and I was waiting for her to drive away. Neither of us went through a process of intellectual ratiocination to decide our courses of action. It was only the interruptions and impasses that produced certain abstracted and articulated expressions, these explanations that Rahim and Stella gave me, and this surprise that Nina conveyed at why I would wait for her.

The idea that things must be lived before they are conceived may be an implicit critique of the triads of spatial production posited by Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991). Perhaps the criticism of certain forms of Marxist analysis, that they reduce individual action to a reflex of one’s position in relation to the means of production, while paying short shrift to agency and experience, also applies here. However, Lefebvre points to the body as “a practico-sensory totality,” (1991:62) hinting
at forms of mediation that are required for conceived spaces, spatial practice, and representational spaces to be effected, to “operate,” as it were. In fact, the question of the body also exercises Lefebvre, a theorist of space and everyday life. He wonders if the body is that which sustains the intellect, or as that which operates as a dispositional structure such that it actualizes a habitus (the latter being a statement developed out of the phenomenological position). Although he chooses neither alternative, he warns against abstraction in a way reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s caution against mistaking conceptualizations to be any more than re-presentations which are built upon a deeper phenomenal reality of the body’s experience.

Under neocapitalism, the body appears as a “spatial body,” (195) produced by a space and subject to that space (hence the passivity of representational or lived space, which is by logical extension the space of the body). In any case, his assertion that the “living organism” can not be “considered in isolation from its extensions, from the space that it reaches and produces,” but must be examined from the effects it has “in its space” (196; emphasis in original), and his concern with smell as a sense that may break the subject-object duality resonate, even if they do not strictly converge, with a phenomenological approach. Questioning the emergence of the Ego as sundered from

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94 Here Lefebvre name-checks the Descartian and phenomenological alternatives.
95 Lefebvre uses this term to refer to the current stage of capitalism; the book was originally published in 1974.
96 Lefebvre privileges smell as a sense that threatens to break the strict separation of subject and object, and is consequently dangerous to the current mode of production, which runs an “immense deodorizing campaign” (198) seeking to turn the experience or reality of smells into forms of representation such as images and verbal discourse.
97 Lefebvre goes on to consider the body as a two-sided machine run by massive energy (in the form of nutrition) and minute energy (in the form of sense data). Here, he posits a conflict between retention and discharge of energy, and extrapolates it to a generalized social conflict between humans. However, because he refers to “organism,” I am not certain if he is speaking of the same body (a corporeal entity and a unity) he began with, or, having problematized the status of the body and seeking a solution, is only evading the question for the time being.
the body, Lefebvre suggests an intervention by “language, signs, abstraction… [which cause] meaning to escape the embrace of lived experience, to detach itself from the fleshly body” (203; emphasis added).

What can be said with relative certainty is that the body represents a problem for critical analysis, and that it exists in a fundamental relation to space for both Lefebvre and Merleau-Ponty. This was the essential purchase they offer here in seeking to understand these interruptions and impasses I returned to repeatedly.

The Body in Space

By considering the body in movement we can see better how it inhabits space (and moreover, time), because movement is not limited to submitting passively to space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their basic significance. [Merleau-Ponty 1962: 102]

While the body may be described as a point in relation to abstract external co-ordinates (such as North-South, or a person on a specific street), any meaningful experience of space begins with the body. A word of placement—‘here,’ ‘there,’ ‘above’—when used in relation to the body does not begin with such external co-ordinates, but actually refers to the “laying down of the first co-ordinates” (100). In turn, this phenomenological conception informs the movement and the actualization of the

That Lefebvre is critical of a Cartesian concept of space is fairly clear. What is also apparent is his discomfort with a dualistic conception of mind and matter.

98 This is very much like the phenomenological critique of dualist approaches that fail to account for lived experience. Further, he explicitly links the body as a practico-sensory entity to the production of space, prior to any intellectual representation of this space. However, because Lefebvre adds the Judeo-Christian tradition and capitalism to the list of culprits along with language, and since the question of the body is secondary to a larger project (the production of space, and a Marxist teleology in general), and because his language slips or changes from speaking of the totality of a body to a privileging of specific senses (smell as discussed above, and hearing, which he claims is prior to a visualization of space), it is difficult to claim a clear affinity or convergence between his analysis and that of phenomenology. For all we know, he might be dismissive of phenomenology as a bourgeois philosophy, yet influenced by it nonetheless.
intentions of a person. In other words, the embodied subject’s intentionality inhabits space so as to make it a field of action.

RapCity was not mainly, or first and foremost, an “objective,” or “abstract” location for Stella. She had lived in the municipal boundaries of RapCity, and now lived on the edge of this place. It was her bodily knowledge of what is “over there,” and her body’s turning speaks of her production of where she lives. This is not to say that she is unaware of the conceived space that produces the two built environments and the municipal line between them, or that such knowledge has no role to play in how her body knows. In fact, she, or rather her body, inherits and intuits this knowledge. Rather, when we asked her to give us a walk around the neighborhood her body spoke without having to intellectualize, represent, and then plan a map of her neighborhood. The project taken hold of by her body, that of showing us her neighborhood, revealed the boundary of the orientated space for her. It did so by turning, naturally, automatically, having been in the world, the world here being her neighborhood, a walk that would have ended there whether we were with her or not.

The moment of using language in the form of an explanation, of re-presenting reality to herself and articulating points within that reality for us, only came when I interrupted her bodily communication, asking her to provide knowledge now, when she had already told us, with her body, where her neighborhood ends. Her body did not move in “empty” space, it performed an action in oriented space, a space produced by her body oriented to an action (the action being a walk around her neighborhood). Her turn was phenomenal. It was not an abstract action, but a concrete one. It was not a turn she “thought about,” it was a turn that was habitual, a knowledge of the body that did not
require reflexes or conceptualization.\textsuperscript{99} In this way she also produced the spaces her body inherits and intuits.

The question was significant nonetheless, because if this was the end of her neighborhood (it was, she had already told us by turning), then what was that space, right next to, in front of, and all around her, which was not her neighborhood? To ask was to provoke, to compel a move from the body to the intellect, from the phenomenal to the representational, to request from her a verbal (mental, abstract) response about what she had said already concretely, phenomenally, but was enigmatic for me. To reiterate, she had already produced and delineated a space that was hers, and by extension, another space which was not hers. I had to ask, and asking was provocation, a provocation to break her bodily existence in the world, enter back into language and representation, to reconstruct verbally and abstractly what her body had communicated already.\textsuperscript{100}

The “spontaneous perception,” so to speak, makes the concrete essence of something clear, making it available for use by the body’s intentionality which makes an object stand out against the horizon, enlisting the object for its projects in the world. A familiarity and communication with an object (a pen, a place) is spoken by the body, which is interrupted when thought (as conventionally understood, and as described here in the context of intellectualist approaches to knowledge) intervenes.\textsuperscript{101} Stella had a

\textsuperscript{99} The concept of habit and the ‘habit-body’ receives much attention in phenomenology (also see Casey 1984; see Merleau-Ponty 1962a:esp. 118-158). The objectives of these descriptions however, were served adequately by “habit.”

\textsuperscript{100} Language here refers simply to speech; Stella’s bodily expression already implies a theory of language.

\textsuperscript{101} I should make clear that the phenomenal idea does not imply that we are mindless bodies, creating anew our experience of the world everyday. All our past experiences serve as an acquired knowledge that informs our dispositions and judgments. The point is that these experiences do not exist in a mental warehouse in the form of images, recalled by the mind when it apprehends a similar reality. They are not images, and they are not stored in the mind. The past is carried in our bodies, and our familiarity, with our
familiarity and communication with not just her neighborhood, but that space called RapCity as well. The communication was to turn around at the corner. I interrupted this by asking, bringing her back into language, asking her to arrive at the meaning through an explanation. Her abbreviated “oh, that’s nothing,” and the downward arc of the hand, this explanation floundered because my question spoke to a knowledge that was held and expressed by the body, and it was like asking her to describe an activity that, in the normal course, she would perform just as is.

There was another reason for her abbreviated response, her befuddlement when she realized how her body had expressed her neighborhood’s limits. It was a conflict between the practical realities of living in close proximity to a “place of danger” and her strident, lifelong commitment to collectivism and anti-racism, a commitment she practices in her life. She lives her commitments in her political activities, in her work, in her regular work for immigrants in detention. To be even more clear, Stella was not one of those progressives that talked about social issues all day yet sought to keep the realities of poverty and crime at bay in their personal life. She lived next to RapCity, and was the one who beat the pavement to find an apartment there for me.

I had not seen anything before or after this day to indicate any aversion in Stella to RapCity or its residents. Yet, it was also true that her house had been broken into, her husband’s car had been stolen from the driveway (it was later found, stripped and abandoned), and homicides were common a few blocks down from where she lived. Her cryptic, fading response spoke to an ambivalence, stemming from the fact that her ideals house for instance, persists only as long as we have these bodies, and the body’s intentionality. This sedimentation, together with the spontaneity of actions are at the core of consciousness.
could never be perfectly reconciled with some of the realities on either side of the invisible door. We will learn more about this in chapter 3.

**Conclusion**

Through a consideration of bodies, discourse and movements on either side, and one curious impasse produced in traversing across these two sides, this chapter sought to evoke a sense of two adjacent space and elicit their mutual constitution, produced by embodied subjects as their body space. The municipal boundaries, the policing routines, the built environment; in other words, the conceived spaces of RapCity and Sleepytown, contoured the experiences of Rahim, Stella, and Nina and their spatial practices at the same time as they inherited, inhabited, and tried to change these spatial practices.

The invisible door, once a surprise, had become self evident to me. What might it mean that I, the outsider, traversed effortlessly through, now to one side and then to the other? The stranger who came today and might leave tomorrow, but instead stayed a while? Arresting and dwelling on moments of habitual action and the interruptions produced by my body in these spaces suggested interpretations of what three interlocutors “said” with their bodies. Rahim’s body, a body with its intentionality and projects, was interrupted by my body and the position it assumed in space, disturbing the phenomenal experience of Rahim and throwing him into speech. He then described the proper bodily habit for the space we were in, one that accounted for the objective political-economic realities of that space, concluding with a pointing to the invisible door. Stella’s body also spoke, but in turn interrupted my body, making me wonder about an invisible door that I could not see, but one she had drawn and had been drawn for her. I sought knowledge,
abstraction, and brought us back to conscious thought. Returning both times to conversation, we sensed what I did not know, and what my interlocutors knew without knowing. Rahim did not need to explain this as he did to me. His children will learn it as they grow up. Perhaps he also needed to teach this to the young men who worked for him in the past. As we will see near the end of the dissertation, similar young men today are not interested in learning, and will perhaps produce their own body techniques and pass them on. Stella did not need to examine the limit of her neighborhood until she showed me that limit. She already knew. Finally, our mutual impasse outside the apartment door in turn pointed to Nina’s insistence on offering safety in the dark, and her expectation that I would secure myself so she could traverse back across the invisible door. It also hinted at the cultural difference, my upbringing that insisted I wait for the departing to leave, which contributed to creating the impasse. The dialectic, if there is one, between the abstract and the phenomenal, was made apprehensible in these encounters across unfamiliarity and cultural difference, which could then be seen as the condition of possibility for this apprehension.

In many ways, it was only through the creation of the door that these two spaces in one place divided from each other came to life. It was a way that residents in either space could create the meaning of their place, find a door that closes in on it, encloses it, one that creates the place as home. These two spaces could not be reified. Those in Sleepytown pondered their future in the wake of an all too real crisis. Others in RapCity also were looking to make meaning, fashion narratives that would assemble their premonitions of what was to come.
Paranoia, Mistrust, Suspicion

A sort of suppressed terror hung in the air and seemed to seize us—a pythian madness, a demoniac possession, that lent a terrible reality to song and word. [Du Bois 1903:134]

…a system that can be felt but not known but which is, nevertheless, believed to be organized and controlled by “the powers that be.” [Stewart and Harding 1999:294]

…it seems to me that Mau Mau has been produced by the colonisation of Africa, and not by indigenous Africa itself. [Gluckman 1959 (1954):724102]

Introduction

This chapter delves into the street life of a few young black men living in and around my fieldsite, in the streets running from the boulevard and further beyond: Otis, William, Isaac, Demaine, and others. The argument is as follows:

At the edge of a “minority city” bearing the scar of persistent poverty and historically one of the higher crime rates in the United States, financialization has made an already unattainable American Dream even more opaque to the financially excluded citizens of this urban community. For young black men, accustomed to intensive police patrolling, unpredictable violence on the streets, and distrust from both neighbors and authorities alike, the movements of the police and other men in the informal-illicit economy impress upon them a perennial feeling of menace, an enduring sense of an ever-present threat. One never knows when one might find oneself in the clutches of the criminal justice system, and the roadmap for successful participation in the formal U.S.

102 In a short piece titled “The Magic of Despair” on the Mau Mau uprising in 1950s Kenya, Gluckman makes a point which is revived by scholars in the 1990s: occult practices are forms of engagement, often with external destructive forces that threaten the social and economic viability of a community. This point about threat and one’s creative responses to it will become relevant in the later pages of this chapter.
economy is blurry at best. Through a transparent recognition of the black man as criminal (Cacho 2012:esp. 1-35), crime and work converge for young black men in this place, even those who are not involved in it. This is a functional outcome for capital accumulation through mass incarceration, through political capital leveraged by opportunistic politicians, and through the profits garnered by wholesalers (but not the men eking out sales on the street) in the illicit economy. Here, I describe and interpret the subjective apprehension of this world by young men in and out of the illicit economy.

For these young men, removed from opportunity and relegated to attenuated forms of livelihood that do not realize their true potential, sources of success and wealth are unclear, and the upward mobility of others—as seen on television, or passed dubiously by word of mouth—appears magical, producing awe and envy. The perennial vigilance entailed in being on the street produces a bodily hexis discussed in chapter 1. Considering their future and the seeming inevitability of the trajectory and end of their lives, spinning in a cycle of underemployment, violence, and disorder, these young men fashion a conspiratorial, apocalyptic vision of what is being done to them and those they know by the ‘Powers that Be’. Strange connections between phenomena work “magically,” subject to recourse in the real world, but rarely disconfirmed by the real world. The trail of fume in the sky is a “chem trail.” A chem trail is meant to poison us.

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103 See chapter 5 for further discussion of this topic, and a different but equally creative response.

104 Magical belief is not subject to correction by experience or empirical data; a magical worldview is also complete, as we would see in Otis’ narrative (Jarvie and Agassi 1970:189-192; also see Mauss in Siegel 2006:30-34). It is essential to clarify here that the idea of magical belief is not deployed in the commonsensical understanding of beliefs in esoteric and irrational practices and rituals. It is used here to refer to a form of practice and a structure of discourse that brings experiences into coherent expression, makes them available in language and therefore available for communication. Magic is used here in its most secular connotation, as “a social phenomenon” (Mauss 2001 [1972]:174). The concern here, then, is not with magic qua “magic,” but in explanations (psychoanalytic, social, or textual) of the efficacy and effect of magic.
Television secretly transmits two images: one that is visible and another invisible, the latter sending messages to create mind control. Fluoride and other chemicals in the water are poison agents. Our bodies have been mortgaged at birth, only we have not been informed. This chapter will describe and interpret the subjective apprehension of this seemingly opaque, fantastic world as experienced by these young men, and the creative narratives they fashion to explain and organize it.

Otis, the protagonist of this chapter, fashions a tale of threats and destructive powers behind the metaphoric ‘curtain’ of the world, moving him and others around like puppet masters. From a difficult childhood, through a life of struggle and illegality punctuated by a near-death moment of crisis after which he discovered his calling as a guardian and a guide of sorts, Otis treats “reality as masked and inherently deceptive,” (Taussig 1992b:113) and explains the ‘really real’ reality of the world to his friends. His storytelling talent is the source of his power, his ability to dominate discourse through paranoid truths that mobilize his own suspicions and anxieties and the fears of others to create a narrative which explains the social world.

Through his tales, Otis manically expressed what cannot be related in conventional forms but which remained palpable to Otis and these young men: the strange association between their lives of struggle and little success, incomplete explanations as to why or how such endemic difficulties persist, and a death he and his

As for paranoia, it is also not deployed here as the description of a clinical condition, of delusion disconnected from reality. The trope of paranoia and conspiracy is a widespread empirical reality in urban communities of color. Arising from U.S. history and testifying to a pervasive skepticism about the world as it appears, paranoia, or “racial paranoia” is “predicated on the dominant belief that you can’t really trust what you see” (John L. Jackson 2015:89). “Something about the truth, about real life, is more powerfully felt than statistically proven, more intuited than seen…. ‘Feeling’…is unreceptive to most forms of external verification” (90).
fellows felt might come any time (and which was, in any case, inevitable once the ‘Powers that Be’ began “the Culling” of mankind, as they believed would happen).

Fearful, they were also fascinated by this inexplicable negativity at the core of the story that Otis tells, explaining the world around them and their place in it. Otis worked his and others’ way out of chaos to speech. This, I believe, is the euphoric effect of the assemblage (see Kluckhohn 1944) Otis created as he explained their imminent death, their destruction along with the majority of the world, in the coming apocalypse. His inventions and beliefs were born out of an alchemy of circumstance and experience, and of an imagination that was simultaneously alarmed and fascinated by the possible deeper import of these experiences.

The sense of menace, the fear that forces are aligning against them, the inchoate feeling that pressed for expression, the explanation of the world that brought no peace, the fear of a deadly apocalypse that will destroy them; the arbitrary way in which some got rich while others did not, where some lived the dream while others found no way to it. Together, the life of struggle in the greatest capitalist country of the world, a near-permanent sense of crisis, and the fear of an inevitable death from causes unknown, produced a narrative of conspiracy that conforms to the structure of witchcraft discourse.
The Meat

“Yo T man, they trying to kill us. Don’t you get it? I’m trying to tell you!” Otis was trying to couch his recommendations for better living in a framework that Toby (“T”) could relate to: Toby’s imminent destruction by “them.” This ominous threat from the ‘theys’ and the ‘thems’ of the world, a threat they both were aware of, was bound to garner Toby’s attention this sunny afternoon. Otis gave T the look—eyebrows rising and going down as the eyes widen before going sideways and down—the conspiratorial nod towards the conspiracy of the ‘Powers that Be’.

We were standing on the sidewalk. Toby was waiting for the bus to go to work and Otis had just come out to work, his somewhat irregular shift waiting for sales on the corner. Today, Otis was extolling the virtues of not eating meat to Toby. Otis clarified that he was not propounding the merits of vegetarianism. “I’m not talking about vegetarian, go vegetarian, shit like that. This is about going to a whole other level. Fuck all that Vegan Shit T, I ain’t talking about you being vegan, I’m talking about you doing what is natural, be natural.” Otis’s concern was what was in “the meat,” and how the Powers that Be used it to control the masses.

Otis is reed thin, lean and tall. He was critical of people who kept trying to get bigger, put on more muscle. He stood on the sidewalk with his oversized football t-shirt hanging off one side of his body, as if he put one arm through it, took the t-shirt over his neck, and then simply neglected to put the other arm through. This made him look even thinner than he was, as if he did not fit his clothes. He told me that it might make sense to
bulk up and get really big if he was going to go to war or something, but not just living the daily life.

He had developed indigenous logics for his claims about meat eating, ever distrustful of dietary recommendations disseminated by a system he believed was designed against him: “How the fuck does a five-ton elephant stay alive without eating meat? Just on plants. And they telling us we need this, we need that. All this shit, proteins, you need meat for proteins, for iron. Fuck that, nigger you can get that shit from cabbage, [from] rice.”

Otis’s views expanded to dairy products, even the food industry as a whole: “You tell me, do cows drink their own milk? Once the kids [calves of cattle] are grown, do they drink milk? Then why the fuck we drinking milk all our lives?! They keep saying shit like you need it for calcium, for protein… sheeit.” Otis always clarified that he was not picking up a dietary practice (vegetarianism, veganism) off the shelf; this was not some kind of fad or trend. He was for real.105

Otis was not always comprehensible when talking about the fantastical benefits that are unlocked when one ceases consuming meat (and hence seeing things for what they ‘really are’). He would often talk about “the Next Level,” about things that one can do and experience at the ‘Next Level’. It sounded like reaching another level in a yogic technique, but I could not confirm if this was an Eastern philosophy that he was talking about (although he made references to “chi” and “your thing, your people” at different times), or something else. He once made a reference to Ascension, but did not elaborate

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105 I imagined that finding alternatives to fast food cheeseburgers would certainly bring perceptible benefits in his sense of physical vitality and personal well-being.
when I asked what it was. He claimed to have gained nigh magical abilities once he stopped eating meat, stopped eating what was fed to the masses: “You can effect shit,” he explained. “I walk up to a tree, touch it, I can tell what’s up. Our ancestors are in the trees.” Otis repeated this, once when he was talking with Rick and me, and another time with me and Toby. With Rick, he had added, “you touch a tree, you know if it is a sad tree, you know sometimes, sad trees… I wake up sometimes, I know shit I never read about. I woke up the other day, telling my bitch about Egypt and the ancients, da-de-da-da-da, shit I didn’t even know before… I tell my bitch, ‘ok, we gonu dream about this tonight.’ I can decide what dream to have.”

Toby stood and listened, getting restless at regular intervals. He would start swinging his hands in front of him, bringing them together at the center of his stomach, fidgeting with the bottle in his hand, and moving from side to side with feet planted. Then he would settle down and listen for a few minutes, before getting restless again. Toby had recently graduated from a college in New York, but his prospects were tenuous and uncertain. He had trouble finding a job, so while he searched, he continued to work for the family’s transportation business, which had been in decline since his mother and father split up. He had a child, although I never saw or heard much about the child or the mother. Toby was also an aspiring rapper.

Toby looked at me a couple of times with widened eyes, as if to ask if I was buying Otis’ explanation about the system, of ‘their’ attempt to assert dominance and control over us through the food they indoctrinated us to eat. I kept a straight face, and it was not simply for Otis’s benefit (he had a tendency to ‘fly off the handle’, get agitated if he got the impression that people are not listening, or did not believe). I kept a straight
face now because I was born and raised vegetarian: eggs were as far as I was allowed. All other non-vegetarian food items were forbidden in the kitchen. Although today I do occasionally eat meat with some relish, I found nothing problematic in what Otis said. I related it to processed meat, the cruel conditions of its production, and its possible health effects on those who regularly consumed it. I nodded in sincere agreement, even though his reasons for avoiding meat were different from mine.

It was harder to project credulity when Otis, ever alert to any sign of doubt in the listener, would describe some of the more fantastical elements of the story that explained the world around him, and our situation in it. When listening in the company of others like Toby, as was the case this time, there was a fine balance between not offending Otis, and risking that others might think I was a little “crazy” too. William and Demaine, and a few other young men who hung with Otis had found the balance. They also shared this feeling that something was wrong, something that could not be exactly said, but was nonetheless palpable. They also believed there was a global conspiracy against the common people. They had followed Otis far enough down the rabbit hole to allow themselves the liberty of glancing away when he said certain things that were too fantastical for them. It was the same with Isaac, another youth who lived here but worked in Brooklyn, New York and occasionally sold marijuana to his friends to make some extra money. He believed that the world was not as we were told it was, that there were lies propagated in the media and by the Government. Otis tolerated or ignored their occasional skepticism due to this shared understanding based on experience and belief.

Of course, most of the time, triumphant at becoming the center of attention and regaling us with his knowledge, old and newly found, Otis did not need to care too much
about the credulity of everyone around him. Once he was safely dominating the conversation, a joy took over him, and he would playfully insult any question before answering it, or not, depending on how he felt at the time. His stories grew more fantastic, and sometimes they would be about his own experiences of pleasure, not only the narratives that offered the key to the world. He wanted to lead the return of pimping in the neighborhood, he wanted to make a movie (Otis only needed a camera, and we never managed to discuss the script), he wanted to get ‘off the grid’. Otis knew the odds were against him, but he was going to do his utmost to survive, and those who listened to him might also have a chance. “I’m trying to tell you!”

A viral tale of Conspiracy and the coming Apocalypse

After the first few interactions with Otis and others (most notably Demaine and William), it became apparent this group subscribed—in a generalized way—to a narrative about a world order dominated by a privileged and unknown few with the objective of obtaining absolute control over humankind and the resources of the earth. Something was going on behind the scenes, things were not as they seemed, and we were all in danger. Most of the dozen or so young men that circulated in and out of this loose circle of friends and acquaintances believed this to be true. There was a large scale conspiracy afoot in the world, and they knew about it, putting together bits and pieces from newsworthy events, daily experiences, and materials they watched and read online. And while evidence of this conspiracy abounded in the mendacity of everyday life, the conspiracy defied conventions of narrative structure: it was dynamic in its means and objects. All that was certain was the final denouement—“they” are going to kill all of “us.” For Otis and his companions, the crowning evidence for this was not the
powerlessness of an intractable socioeconomic circumstance alone, but rather a series of words carved into an obscure monument known as the Georgia Guidestones, which was commissioned through an anonymous donation in Georgia in the late 1970s.

Nestled atop an isolated hill in a rural county of Georgia, the Georgia Guidestones are an assemblage of massive, granite slabs arranged in astronomical alignment, onto which an uncanny, almost post-apocalyptic series of instructions are engraved to guide mankind to an Age of Reason. The true meaning of the engravings has never been confirmed and remains the subject of debate, but the Guidestones provide precepts for population and reproductive control (including the dictate to maintain a human population under 500,000,000, in balance with nature).

To Otis and his companions, the Guidestones embody an incontrovertible articulation by the ‘Powers that Be’ of their objective to annihilate 95% of the world’s population, which Otis grimly refers to as ‘the Culling’. In line with this, according to Otis the ‘Powers that Be’ are achieving their objective by first, obtaining total control of the world economy, next progressing to assert complete control over natural phenomena, and finally, complete and total mind control over all of mankind. In keeping with this, one website\(^\text{106}\) extends the mind control agenda of the ‘Powers that Be’ to the use of “the dialectic” in education—in 1985, the Soviet Union borrowed American teaching technologies, and in return shared mind control and indoctrination technologies (including the dialectic) used in Soviet schools. In this sense, the ‘Powers that Be’ also represent an obliteration of these supposed ideological conflicts between capitalism and communism in the world (and may even be responsible for creating the illusion of such a

dichotomy in worldviews in the first place). Similar claims can be found on other sites,\textsuperscript{107} some of which also sell merchandise\textsuperscript{108} and produce TV programs. The hyperlinks on the topic multiply almost endlessly once one begins researching, a veritable industry built around conspiracy – of which, Otis and his young friends are avid consumers.

Otis explains that the ‘Powers that Be’ are an exclusive group of people who own and run everything in our world. They are responsible for everything that happens, including natural phenomena such as hurricanes. They buy us at birth. In 1913, Otis once intimated, the United States went bankrupt,\textsuperscript{109} and at that time certain people in Europe, who had lost in the Revolutionary War, started a system of buying people up. Our children are sold as soon as we sign a birth certificate when they are born. The certificate is proof of sale (only we do not know it, do not even know that we have signed over the life that has just come into this world). We are enslaved without our knowledge. “They” are doing all this because they have decided that 95% of the people in the world must die in the Culling. After all, you can read this goal on the Georgia Guidestones, where the primary objectives of the ‘Powers that Be’ are written.

We had talked about the Culling and impending apocalypse many times. After repeated probing, Otis once divulged that the ‘Powers that Be’ began with the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[\textsuperscript{107}] http://rense.com/general16/georgiaguidestones.htm accessed June 27, 2013
\item[\textsuperscript{108}] For instance, “BIOAGE: biosuperfood; Radiation Protection with Super BioNutrition.”
\end{enumerate}
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This page may be read for its historical outline of the US Congress’s surrender to the international banking cartel in 1913, and its ceding of US sovereignty to the Federal Reserve. In 1929, every world government followed suit in surrendering its sovereignty to the international banking cartel. It is written by a computer programmer whose maxim is “I want to do useful work and get paid, without having to report it for taxation, confiscation, and regulation.” Elsewhere on the blog, the author identifies a group of 50-100 people as the Supreme Leader of Humanity. “Certainly, it seems like there's a malevolent force controlling everything,” he concludes.
Rothschilds\textsuperscript{110}, who came back from Europe, had five sons who “went to different lands,” and allied with other powerful and wealthy people. Because they are the richest in the world, they quickly started controlling everything. I told Otis it does not sound so plausible, and he told me I am dumb and retarded, and that all the facts are out there, this is all true. When I insisted, he said that a fact is a fact. So there.

\textbf{Early Days of another life}

Otis was born in the Cayman Islands. His mother was 14 when he was born. His father, he told me, raped his mother, and they (mother and son) were “exiled” to Jamaica from the Cayman Islands when Otis was two days old. His father had then married his mother to avoid controversy and legal charges, and brought his family to the U.S. when he was four. Once here, his parents separated, and Otis and his mother were shunned by the rest of his father’s family. Some of those relatives still lived in this area, close to where we were standing, a place where Otis had lived since he came to the U.S. He never told me what became of his mother.

On slow afternoons, in snatches lasting from a few seconds to a few minutes, he would recount days of his youth. He would walk the streets, filled with an inexplicable anger. “I was angry, I was just mad, you feel me?” Once, after a confrontation with a neighbor who “sucker-punched”\textsuperscript{111} him, he walked around on the sidewalk wielding a machete for days. “I was just like, ‘what’s up,’ to anyone that looked at me; I was ready to fuck with anybody.” He had never gained citizenship. The process for obtaining

\textsuperscript{110} Later Otis changed this to the Rockefeller family. Rothschild, Rockefeller, it did not make much difference.

\textsuperscript{111} Sucker punch: to strike another without providing fair warning that a contentious situation had now escalated into a physical confrontation. Instead, the sucker punch itself serves as this communication.
residency outlined in the DREAM Act, which was introduced to Congress during Barack Obama’s presidency, was no help, he told me one day. President Obama’s plan for children of undocumented individuals who graduate from U.S. high schools was in the news, but one had to be less than 30 years of age to qualify. He was not. In any case, the DREAM Act never passed into law. The immigration people could come get him anytime.

Otis was what I called an “independent” in my conversations with Rajinder, the young man from Punjab who ran the neighborhood convenience store. Otis was independent, a free but small player in the relatively meager street economy of the boulevard. He was not part of the three crews who controlled the territory, although he sometimes bought materials in bulk from them to sell to his clients. Although he had everyone’s respect, he avoided creating too much of a ‘profile’, that is, visibility or local fame. He did a few deals everyday, sometimes he conducted business on the phone (when he could afford one), and also looked out for irregular encounters with infrequent consumers on the block. While he lamented on some afternoons the inability of the guys working the boulevard to come together and put their work under unified leadership, and although he often spoke in animated dreams of the future about bringing pimping back, organizing the business around the corner and getting everybody to their millions, he was not going to take it upon himself to make a sustained play for leadership of the effort to federate these disparate groups; he was not that type of guy. Isaac was the only one he

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112 When I first met him, Otis did not have a phone. He was still working off a few debts at the store and in other places, accrued during a difficult period. Soon, however, he was debt free as he told me he would be, and had enough to buy a phone.
claimed to have schooled, to “put him on” the first time, teaching him the rules of the game for slinging on the corner and amongst the college crowd. Once or twice while we hung out smoking and drinking under a tree on a street near the boulevard, he would observe Isaac and express pride, and in one passing reference said, “that boy like my son on this shit.”

Otis was in jail on assault charges for two weeks after the incident where the neighbor had punched him in the process of an inconsequential argument. This man was older and had steady legal employment, enough to shift all suspicion of wrongdoing onto Otis, an “unemployed” youth sparring with a middle class, respectable working citizen. Coupled with the ‘leave alone’ and ‘remain silent’ conventions of the street and the neighborhood when it came to other people’s legal affairs, it was Otis’s word against that man’s and the police were inclined to believe the “respectable middle class” gentleman’s version of the events over Otis. But Otis got off lightly; the two weeks in jail counted as time served and the case was concluded. Recalling that time, the only time he ever spent incarcerated, Otis told me, “this shit [jail] was a human warehouse, that’s what I saw.” Without any savings or a bank account, living entirely in the cash economy, Otis was excluded from the financialized economy of American capitalism. In fact, without citizenship or a social security number, he was nearly invisible to the state.

The Meat (continued)

Otis chastised me for sweating (“it’s all that meat you ate”), as I walked up from the bus stop half a mile down the street. “You’re sweating too,” I said after laughing at
his irritation with my perspiration and what it signified, my intractable meat consumption
and, in turn, my ignorance. And the little sheen of sweat that I saw on his face? Otis
asserted it was an act of volition, that he had “put it there” to stay moisturized. My
sweatiness, and his voluntary sheen of coolant, was enough to start him up on the meat
again:

When I did it (stopped eating meat), the first few days I got rashes on my
stomach and arms. My bitch ask[ed] me, “something wrong with you?
What happened?” When my bitch baby, I took her off it, she had rashes on
her face and chest…. My skin used to itch and shit, but not now…I give
myself goose bumps man, I ain’t sweating in this heat. [He would stand in
the sun] to get the vitamin D…most people just sit at home, watching TV,
and all they eat, they just shit it out! I’m getting it direct, vitamin D; I
stand in the sun…. I’m taking it to the next level man; soon no water, just
air.

Otis had recently ‘quit smoking’ as well, allowing himself a Black and Mild once
in a while, also a tobacco product in the form of a thin cigar with a plastic filter. He
claimed one could stop eating food and drinking water altogether. I was reminded of
rishis and munis from India, mystic men who meditated in isolation on mountains and in
the forest for years on end, with no apparent protection from the cold and without food or
water.

Earlier that day when he scolded me for perspiring in the sun, Otis had walked to
the door of a local take out sandwich shop as I was picking up my order. He opened the
glass door, and asked, “you ain’t eating that meat, right K?” I looked over, smiled and
pointed, “vegetable sandwich, man.” Otis nodded and mentioned, “I saw that shit last
night you were talking about, that shit is deep” (we had discussed a documentary film
called “Food, Inc.” It delved into the production and marketing of industrial food and
their harmful impacts on the environment and the health of individuals). Otis had not
come to his ideas about meat from that film, however; he formulated them based on what he learned over the Internet, doing research intermittently when he had a computer. This was part of his ongoing quest to understand in greater detail how the ‘Powers that Be’ are going to act when they begin ‘the Culling’, the final extermination of 95% of the world’s population, and what he could do to be ready for that coming moment.

“Tyson, Purdue, they own all the meat in the world. They (are) selling you the same shit. They (are) trying to tell you its safe.”

Aside from dropping the names of large industrial meat companies, the frequent references to Monsanto and genetically modified crops that often came out of Otis’s mouth would please globalization activists (Graeber 2005), although his analysis, reasoning and conclusions may not cohere with theirs. For one thing, the United States was effectively the world for Otis, although he would make references to other countries from time to time. Further, he believed that the food industry is set up to drug and control the masses; profits were an incidental consequence. All this “bullshit,” about making production more efficient, is just that, he said when I pointed out that mass production is more profitable.

All a cow needs is to be left out in the grass. No, they tell you it’s cheaper this way [herding them in stables and feeding them growth hormones to reduce the cost of maintaining pastureland and the time needed to grow], fuck that. They doing it to put all that corn, the chemicals, the steroids in the cow [and in turn, into us].

The ‘Powers that Be’ were not merely profit hungry capitalists. Their agenda was mind control, not greater profits, and corn and chemicals were their weapons, not their cost-effective tools. That they wanted to slowly poison and stupefy Otis, preparing for his
final elimination, of this there was no doubt. He had to remain vigilant at all times lest the Culling commence under the pretext of a crisis.

Otis seemed to be sticking to his “quit meat and become free” agenda. Months ago, at the time of Superstorm Sandy (not a natural phenomenon according to the young conspiracy theorists of this chapter, but rather a storm wrought with weather machines by the ‘Powers that Be’) he was all about self-sufficiency: making your own electricity, growing your own food, getting off the grid so that “they” can’t lock you in. Later he would intensify his drive towards self-sufficiency, radically turning it towards his body. In his planned progression from no meat (vegetarian) to fruitarian in about 18 months; onto “liquidarian” in another year, and finally no food; only air (“air-ian”). Otis anticipated he would eventually not need to eat at all.

A Crisis: How Otis died and discovered his Calling

Otis believed they put chemicals in the meat to dull our brains and control our minds. Some conspiracy theories point to occult forces, or the Devil fighting against (Christian) God, but Otis for a long time was “not about that.” Nevertheless, Otis’s anti-meat crusade had biblical overtones, as he marshaled theological evidence in service of his claims. “It’s in the Bible man, Jesus spilled his blood…you don’t spill the blood of another being. Its not meant for you, not good for you. It takes forty days to wash that shit out of you, it’s in the Bible.” Once he began his ‘Crusade’ on meat, he would repeatedly refer to the “forty days and forty nights” that one must cleanse one’s body of meat. After all, “that is why it says that in the Bible. Man, I’m trying to tell you!”
Whether he was referring to Lent alone, or to something broader, I don’t know. But it seemed his montage was not as averse to religion as he claimed.

The first time I met Otis, he explained to me that he did not want to offend anyone, but “all these religions, they are not true.” This agnosticism prefaced the story of his near-death experience. One afternoon, having played basketball and then consumed too much malt liquor and marijuana, Otis became massively dehydrated and suddenly lost consciousness. “I was playing, not drinking water, then had some malt liquor and some weed [marijuana], and then I went to piss 10 times and then I went one more time and wanted to but couldn't, you feel me?” As soon as he returned from his eleventh trip to the bathroom, he collapsed on the bed. He was inside his room, all alone, when he lost consciousness.

Otis says he died then, and in the process, discovered “the wisdom of the ancients.” Soon after his death, he found himself walking in a place suffused in white light – where everyone goes once they die (“It’s not an entity, feel me, it is a place”). An aura surrounded everything and he had a guide walking alongside him. This heaven-like realm was organized like a school, with different levels, and each person had a guide connected to him or her. There is always a guide alongside each one of us, only visible in this realm but also with us on Earth, forever connected to that person. If the guide lost that connection with you, they would become uncontrolled and produce chaos, Otis explained, eventually likening them to demons. A woman came to him as he was walking in this place, and simply told him that it was not his time yet. He turned to see her walking away, and when he turned back, he saw the wall of his house again. He had returned from the dead.
In this remarkable little story, Otis explains his moment of crisis, and the discovery of insight, his vision of the world which is clearer than that of others. The guide who was next to him is available to everyone, since everyone has a guide unless they lose the connection. If they lose that connection, the guides would become malevolent, perhaps bedeviling those who they were supposed to guide. Having been erroneously killed and sent back, his guide was still with him. Perhaps the guide was even more present to Otis than before, helping to heighten his awareness to extraordinary levels. Or maybe Otis had his guide inside of him now, having crossed over the threshold, having ingested the limit of death and his guide with it. Like a shaman, he had left consciousness and traveled across the line between life and death, between heaven and earth. His experience amounted to a death and resurrection, and now he believed he could cross the line at will (although he never did again), and transcend the realm of human senses.

There was the quality of a reverie to moments like these and the times he described his childhood, of something mystical that had awakened him to his own special powers, powers that enabled him to see through the illusion that was this world. Something spoke through Otis. It seemed he fancied himself an ascetic, a sage who stood apart from the world yet walked through it, free of its illusion and sustained by his own aura, marginal yet essential to the social system, the one who helped make sense of it all for those who suffered and wondered at their collective impotence. In this way, Otis was essential; he completed the system.

At the same time, it seemed that Otis was not only liberated by the story of his death and resurrection, but also trapped by it. It took him only a minute or two to tell me
everything described above. It was a remarkably short story, given its incredible import in his life. He recounted the details without flourish, quickly and concisely reporting the facts: play, intoxication, dehydration, death, the other world, and return from the dead. He was neither soberly cold, nor excited by the story. He simply reported it in words, telling me what happened. Like the repetition of the details of an accident that happened to someone else, something traumatic that remained unresolved, he simply reported. It was a gift from nowhere, an experience whose provenance was unclear. It seemed as if someone else spoke through him.

Recounting the story neither brought him further insight nor relief – in the same way that his narrative of an ominous conspiracy overshadowing the world and our place in it never brought him lasting peace, despite the attention it garnered, and the transient sense of control it helped him achieve. The singularity of this event was not tamed by the story Otis told about it. It remained partial, like his access to this alternative reality that he articulated through stories about meat, the culling, and flat earth (see below). Yet, his excitement telling these stories showed he channeled a power he was aware of, could not recognize, but was also enthused by having some kind of encounter with it. The interest of others showed they knew something about this power too, though it was Otis who channeled their encounter with it. Otis fashioned a discourse that others gravitated around. For them, Otis “validate[d] the system of which they possess only a fragment” (Lévi-Strauss 1963c:173). For Otis, notwithstanding the unresolved nature of this experience, he was bound to his vocation. Having entered the realm of death, he had a special knowledge of when it might come for us, when we would face it for the first and last time. The ‘Powers that Be’ could not blind Otis anymore.
One day I heard Otis from my window. “I talk to God everyday, he loves me so much, he loves me so much sometimes he lets me call him Otis.”

**Daily Life**

Given the wilder stories from his past and the negative stereotypes associated with someone who was not in a normative occupation, Otis was not a raging, out-of-control person most of the time (and he did not tell these stories all the time either). He was often at pains to be reasonable and teach others to be the same when faced with the institutional authorities of his society (which in the case of Otis meant mainly the Police). After all, part of the difficulty for the urban poor was an absence of recognition from the state, the lack of connection other than periodic encounters of being processed: be it by the welfare system, or by the criminal justice system. While the nation continued to operate, at least rhetorically, on a foundation of ‘middle class economics’, with middle class families representing the American Dream and serving as the pillar of the U.S. economy, those who had not joined the middle class found themselves absent in the nation’s imagination, or worse, present only as a threat to the social order when they flashed up on television screens, ever associated with crime and poverty and pathology, as the men of the “underclass.”

Otis would advise others of the correct method of dealing with a policeman—address any policeman as “Officer,” and avoid congregating in a group on the corner to give police reasons for suspicion. Given the opportunity, Otis wanted to explain to any officer who might accost him that he was unemployed and standing on the corner only long enough to have a cigarette or a cold drink before going back to his room in a basement down the street. And this was the material condition of his life—it was
routinized around the lack of routine and repetition, the normalcy of chaos and unpredictability. There might be a day when he might not eat when he wanted because he had no money in his pocket and had to wait to make a sale. There might be a day when his standing on the corner would be sufficient pretext for an arrest. Any day might bring violence that was random and inexplicable, flowing not from his own actions but simply occurring as a consequence of finding himself on the boulevard at the wrong time.

“Better than standing out here on the Ave,” Otis said one night when I told him I had a long day at the university.

**Flat Earth, baby**

A year and half into knowing him, “flat Earth” became Otis’s hook, the line he used to greet people who would stand around for a little while on some evenings, to chat or intoxicate. A surprising and counterintuitive slogan to intrigue others into listening to him, Otis would simply stand there and proclaim, “flat Earth, baby,” or “flat Earth nigger,” piquing the interest of those hanging out with him that day, or making others who were coming out of the nearby store pause and listen for a moment. The flat Earth thesis, invariably articulated after rounds of drinking and smoking marijuana, was that the commonly-accepted idea of the Earth being round is a myth created and propagated by the ‘Powers that Be’. They had done an experiment in Sweden, he explained, where they installed a telescope at ground level, pointed straight ahead, parallel to the ground. With a clear line of sight, this telescope should have seen the road curving down after a point, because the Earth is round. No matter how the range was set, however, this did not happen. Ergo, the Earth is must be flat. Otis added this to his arsenal of tales which
demonstrated that things were not as they were told. In fact, since it did not have a specific end goal, the flat Earth thesis proved one of the most powerful and flexible forms of “proof” that things were not as they seemed.\textsuperscript{114}

Ergo, this was proof positive, just like “chem trails,” and just like the weather machines that created Superstorm Sandy, that “they are trying to kill us.” The thin long clouds of smoke that we see suspended in the sky are not the residue of jet fuel from jets or other aircraft. No. They are “chem trails,” fumes filled with chemicals that drug and stupefy the people without their knowledge, deployed to create a docile population and prevent violent outbreaks against the system. Similarly, Superstorm Sandy was a man-made, carefully controlled experiment designed to test the public’s readiness for ‘natural’ disasters—to examine the consequence of a breakdown in public infrastructure, constriction in the supply of essential goods, and above all, the people’s proclivity to

\textsuperscript{114} On the Flat Earth idea, see a recent petition: https://www.change.org/p/google-mark-2015-as-the-rebirth-of-the-flat-earth-theory accessed January 21, 2016
\url{http://nymag.com/following/2016/01/consider-the-flat-earth-theory.html#} accessed January 20, 2016. What is especially fascinating about this article is how it suggests that while all this may be untrue, it is certainly interesting to read about, to think and discuss: “Conspiracy theories are very funny once you lean into them! Imagine finding out that a basic assumption about your life is completely wrong. It’s liberating, in a way. If nothing else, it gives you something to talk about.” This message at the end of the article that does not believe in the flat earth theory still marks the attraction of such ideas, even as humor, and suggests that they are not only good conversation starters, but even liberating. One can slide down the slope in enjoyment. Kathleen Stewart has also noted the attraction of conspiracy theories in her book Ordinary Affects. Quite apart from this, I must note that there is a difference defined perhaps by social class in the reception of such ideas. Otis and his friends did not “dabble” in these ideas with disbelief unsuspended. At the same time, we will see that they, especially Otis, did derive pleasure from having a key that unlocked the mystery of their world and crucially, their own place in this world.

Also see an exhaustive documentary: \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5i_iDyUTCg} accessed January 21, 2016. For a book by the creator of this video: \url{http://www.atlanteanconspiracy.com/2015/08/200-proofs-earth-is-not-spinning-ball.html}

The idea has been getting a lot of attention recently, with ex-celebrity Tila Tequila tweeting her issues with the “round earth” theory, the aforementioned change.org petition, and an ongoing conflict between proponents of the flat earth idea as this view fragments into adherents with different alliances.
rebel. The fact that there was no break in electricity on one side of the boulevard during
the hurricane, while there was a three-day long blackout on streets just thirty feet across
from the boulevard only served to confirm Otis’s claims that the hurricane was pre-
planned and well-coordinated. Flat Earth was the final proof of the imminent culling, and
Otis’s calling.

A probing discussion on this issue, which culminated in my asking him about the
satellite images of the spherical Earth that are taken from outside Earth, led Otis to deny
science in toto as a pack of lies. It was just the two of us speaking, and as his mood
improved and his demeanor was relaxed, I felt comfortable probing him about these
beliefs. With others around, it might have appeared a threat to his domination. Otis’
charisma and certainty was part of his attraction, integral to his ability to construct a
narrative and dominate others. Everyone had questions about the world and their place in
it, and Otis provided answers. Between their experiences and their hopes there was a
discordant factor. Otis provided the copula that joined the two and achieved a synthesis.

These questions were also, naturally, tinged with their frustration at their social
position. All around them was a world pervaded with commodities and spectacles of
hedonism and enjoyment. Clothing, shoes, alcohol, big cars, beautiful women, all
available to everyone in this capitalist dream of wealth and success. Everyone except
them, handsome, well built, attractive and deserving men, willing to work hard but not
being given the opportunity to do so. Reality did not match up, and did not quite add up.
The workings of capitalism became opaque and fantastic for William, Demaine, Isaac
and others in their circle as they came of age. Otis offered a narrative that explained, that
organized the disparate phenomena that drew their attention into a coherent story. And it
was a flexible narrative, always capable of incorporating new material into itself and adjusting to changing realities. After all, the ‘Powers that Be’ were always devising new ways to ensure they can do what they want when the time comes for the Culling.

I asked whether he really thought it was true, that the Earth was not round? (“Of course it’s flat, I just told you”). Then what about science in general, the things we know about nature, and chemistry and what we learned in school? Given the need to now examine the propositional logic of his “proof,” Otis was willing to, and indeed went all the way. It was all one big lie, Otis told me, it was one big story told to keep us under control and keep us from questioning reality. Gravity was “bullshit”; it was all an illusion.

“Flat Earth” was new, it was unique, it promised a new key to a total explanation of what was happening in reality. Otis did not need to even consider that this meant most of the ideas about the planetary system must have been fabricated at some point and then taught in classrooms all around the world. When I inquired and probed, Otis was ready to go all the way to ensure the Earth remained flat. Gravity was a lie, it had to be, because the Earth was flat. Reality could only offer proof of what he knew.

The Nature of Proof

It was not an experience of something that he knew he could not explain that led Otis to formulate these fantastic, implausible stories. It was not a moment of being overwhelmed, and a recovery that allowed him to recover his faculties through a recognition that he had been overwhelmed, although he did sense that there was a force confronting him and it was threatening and exciting. Rather, for him the idea of the Earth being flat simply supplied a word, or a phrase: Flat Earth, which proclaimed recognition
that something strange was at work in the world. Chem trails, a widely-believed idea of airborne mind control; fluoride in the water and in toothpastes; the Illuminati, a secret society that has been fighting against God on the side of Satan; strange iconography on currency notes harkening back to the Freemasons; and countless other ideas such as these circulated in the neighborhood and elsewhere, and touched Otis as well. None of these conceptions ever really brought relief to their adherents, however; they simply served to designate an entrenched suspicion of nefarious forces abounding in the world in a relatively satisfactory fashion. The propositional logic behind these assertions were besides the point; they did whatever work they could do for the time being. The predominant reasoning amounted to this one fact: *something is hidden behind the world that we see.*

An example of this lack of propositional logic in obtaining “proof” of a concept or idea could be the following. Rick would make the point that Hitler was actually a Jew right after Otis or someone else might have talked about TV being an agent of mind control. William or Demaine would mention that William had been transporting ordinance to the Canadian border the last few weeks. And that was it, it would be clear to everyone that this meant one thing: “Yeah, yeah, shit is going on man, there’s a lot they are not telling us.” This would be the proof, the connection, one lacking a propositional logic that connected one item to another. It simply designated a misgiving, an experience of something uncanny in daily perception that pressed for expression.

Or, a conversation might proceed by talking about a black helicopter, move on to someone else having seen a jet leaving a white fume in its wake around the same time (‘Yeah, man I saw that, was it around noon? You saying it was 2 p.m.? Yeah, I think I
saw that jet around the same time”), and someone else might remind everyone that the storm called Sandy a few months ago was created by weather machines. The connection here? They were all flying aircraft of one kind or another, they were all in the sky, and they were seen by people at roughly the same time (the fact that the storm was a few months ago and no one saw the purported weather machines did not cause pause). That is as far as the proof went and needed to go, and most of the time, the connections between phenomena seen and unseen were not worked out even to this extent. It was proof, it all meant one thing: the end was coming, and “They” were trying to kill us.

These were magical judgments, beliefs that are tested in the real world, but are rarely if ever subject to disconfirmation in the real world. Conceptual leaps were made to connect event and implication, fact and inference, totaling up to the perception of an imminent menace, a clear and present danger that might strike at any moment. While specific targets of these threatening forces may vary, the totality of threat was the complete destruction of society as it exists, and amounting to an existential threat for the person so bedeviled. And the presence of others helped sustain and nourish, and in turn draw some relief from, their stories.

With Otis at its center and those who moved in and out of his orbit, this formation functioned like an impromptu support group. This group lacked the structure of an organized entity, one with a specified agenda, some rules for membership and periodic congregation times, which are characteristic of support groups that emerge around paranormal phenomena (see for instance Lepselter 1997). What they had in common with other such groups, however, was the sometimes-cathartic nature of this cluster. Demaine,

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115 Further on the nature of proof, see Siegel (2006) and Favret-Saada (1980).
William, Isaac, Rick and Otis’s concerns were very much of this world, stemming from alienation from power, remoteness and obscurity of those in power, and the hopes (denied, but still alive) of a life of wealth and hedonistic success. This loose formation articulated anxieties in allegorical form, and proffered explanations in the shape of narratives that helped explain why there seemed to be no way out from the disenfranchisement they experienced in what they were told is the foremost country in the world. Instead, upon realizing that things are not as they seem to be, they preferred to be fascinated and suspicious, and find alternative connections and explanations. These conspiracy theories confirmed their situation, without revealing the class and racial structure of hierarchy in the United States.\textsuperscript{116} The group helped hold in abeyance the crippling potential of wondering whether their paranoia, mistrust, and suspicion, while essential to living in this place, was misplaced, or worse, abnormal and pathological. They would have nowhere to go.

**The Orbit of Otis: Demaine**

Others in the neighborhood that gravitated in a loose orbit around Otis had their own experiences that defied the normal. Demaine talked about the Illuminati, the secret society that controlled most of his idols, the hip-hop stars of the music industry. He described how this battle, between God and the Devil, went back to the beginning of time. I would reckon this is biblical time, but the distinction was not meaningful for Demaine, so I did not point it out to him one winter evening when he sat across from me on the couch in my apartment. High on marijuana, Demaine outlined his difficulties in

\textsuperscript{116} This class and racial structure and its origin in capitalism is something that the COS claimed to reveal, but never could to Otis and others, because the COS members could not “cross the street,” their “intentional communities” did not flower. See chapters 3 and 4.
the coming summer. A Teacher’s Assistant\textsuperscript{117} at a local school, he needed to find other ways to “get my bread up,”\textsuperscript{118} make money (bread) while the school was closed for the summer holidays. In addition to that, Demaine wanted to get through the summer without facing random violence. He often affirmed that he was not the kind to pick a fight with anyone, but if trouble came looking for him, he will not run away: “I ain’t beat.”\textsuperscript{119} He was about 5’7” and has an excellent physique, lean and athletic. However, unhappy at his size, he was constantly “trying to get [his] weight up,” build up his body with large muscles and bulk.

Son of an Italian father and a mother with African American and Native American heritage. “My mother is Black and Cherokee on both sides, her father and mother. That means slavery,” said Demaine with a hint of trepidation. It seems his forefathers on his mother’s side had escaped slavery and were taken in by a Native American Nation, where they intermarried and eventually Demaine was born. He was 22 years old.

“You’re giving me chills,” said Demaine upon learning that the Freemasons had lodges in India at least since the British colonial era. It confirmed for him the existence, the realness, of “They,” as Demaine referred to them generally, or the ‘Powers that Be’, as Otis called them. That “They” existed in India too, a place so far away in another part

\textsuperscript{117} As a Teacher’s Assistant, Demaine had to supplement the disciplinary and organizational aspects of the teacher’s role. He had to monitor the halls, ensure kids have tasks to do if a teacher misses class, and help organize school events and activities.

\textsuperscript{118} “…up”—Getting something to increase (getting the bread up, getting the weight up). Getting his weight up would also make Demaine more a man to be reckoned with, given his shorter stature, a man with some status in the neighborhood beyond that of an easygoing guy. A man of means (one who also had his bread up) with a healthy physique would also presumably be sought after by many women, so he could have intimate encounters, get his penis “up.”

\textsuperscript{119} “I ain’t beat”—an assertion that one will not concede defeat or avoid a challenge. Also infrequently used as an assertion that one is certain of what they are speaking about.
of the world, spoke to their global reach. This global reach in turn testified to their agenda of world domination, its undeniable reality as a force in this world. They aimed to end (Christian) God’s reign on Earth and begin the age of Satan. What the Freemasons had to do with the Illuminati, the secret society Demaine and many others in the neighborhood spoke about, was unclear. Yet, it did not matter that there was more than one entity in the cabal of forces composing the evocative third person pronoun “They.” They were always doing something, and new events kept confirming that something was going on.120

In the next section, I digress briefly on the nature of exchanges on the street, the relations of reciprocity between people. They reflect the sense of mundane mistrust and suspicion that permeated relations, as well as individual dispositions.121 A menace is permanent on the street and in the lives of young men I encountered. It flashes occasionally, brightening and waning, and renders paranoia, mistrust, and suspicion normal and essential to existence in this public space, informing the daily minutiae and mundane encounters of exchange.

**Anxious Reciprocity and Suspicious Exchange**

“It's meat man, the brain has serotonin, that creates and regulates your curiosity. Meat blocks that. That's why they [young boys] don't listen to sense. They are all docile, they have no curiosity,” Otis reflected while waiting for contributions to the blunt he was

120 Demaine’s paranoia ran away from him in the following year. Frustrated with the lack of work (after quitting the teacher’s assistant job, he had worked for a while clearing snow at the airport, and once that was over, flitted from short term job to job), the final straw was when Saleem got into an argument with him and punched him. Saleem had given Demaine something for safekeeping, and it was lost. After this day, Demaine stopped coming out of his mother’s house completely. Two of his friends told me he has become paranoid and keeps worrying about an impending catastrophe.

121 The latter are presented as a specific bodily hexis in chapter 1, where the focus is on how an embodied vigilance reflects a normalized state of emergency.
rolling. We were standing outside Otis’s basement room. With us was Isaac was a young man who worked and studied in Brooklyn and occasionally hung out. Otis doted on him a little. Isaac had gone inside to wash his face. Otis and Isaac’s girlfriends sat nearby.

I put in four dollars, and that was enough for things to get started. Isaac had not returned when Otis finished rolling, so he proclaimed “this one’s just for you and me, Isaac ain’t put up (contributed any money for this blunt and the marijuana in it).” Isaac returned, and just to provoke matters a little, I held it in the middle of the two of them, letting them decide who will take it or not. Otis was not looking, so Isaac just took it. I made a joke about it a few minutes later, trying to provoke some conversation on the extremely marketized, debt-avoiding commensality I had observed around the smoking of marijuana and the sharing of alcohol.

According to the rules, Isaac was not entitled to the blunt. Everyone who wanted to smoke must contribute, and until the person with the dime bag reached ten dollars, the smoking could not begin. Further, the amount one can consume was finely calibrated, and enforced. Someone who put in one dollar could smoke too much, and if they tried, they were “checked,” told to ease off and pass it on. The conversation around the smoking was congenial enough, going on as it was before this cycle of reciprocity was inaugurated. The instant extinguishing of all exchange and the almost total refusal of a relation of credit and debt for even a short period of time always felt odd, even though I was used to it by now and understood the reasons for it. Credit was an unreliable venture here, where no one seemed to have a very steady cash flow, or could be fully relied on to pay back their debt. If you extended credit and could not recover your money it was your fault, and your problem. Yet, I could never get used to the tenor of these moments, always trying to
break them by putting an extra dollar in, or share more than I should of beers I had bought.

So today, according to Otis and according to the rules, Isaac was not entitled to this blunt; it was only for Otis and me. Truth be told, it was mainly for Otis: he wanted to smoke, and in the usual style of the hustler, was asking around to make it a shared joint so he could make some money “getting high on his own supply.” This is the reason I put up only four and not five dollars (half of the notional cost of the dime bag), to trigger his decision and keep him from going on about it, but simultaneously break this idea that there was an actual transaction towards contributions to smoking going on. When I put up four dollars, I left room open, rather, I invited a third party to join the scheme, because between just the two of us there was not a symmetry established as there would be if I had contributed exactly half. None did, and the real nature of this mobilization immediately revealed itself as Otis made a sort of magnanimous gesture with his shoulders and face: ‘Ok, no one else is putting up, but I will make do with just this contribution for the good of everyone because I am generous like that,’ so to speak. 122

Not content to leave it there, once Isaac had taken the blunt that only Otis and I had contributed to, I brought it up again. I asked if he was qualified to smoke, smiling and obviously joking. “I always smoke man,” said Isaac, the by now familiar faux-friendly stiffness rising with a smile at any hint of a doubt. So I pointed out that Otis was the administrator of this blunt, and he had deemed it explicitly otherwise. Otis heard us

122 Consider also the form in which Otis contributed – he did not bring out any money because the dime bag was his, and I simply gave him four dollars. The sale value of the dime bag was ten dollars, but obviously it was cheaper than that for Otis. I don’t think he made a loss here, my contribution covered his cost at the very least, or else he most likely would not have demonstrated his generosity, instead making further noises about how no one wants to smoke, how he is willing to put up stuff that he would sell otherwise, how he was doing this at a loss to himself, and so on.
and joined back, attention drifting from the two girls he was talking to (his girlfriend, and Isaac’s friend). He ratified what I said, but in a mumble, before turning it back on me, saying that when he smokes, he holds it out only to whoever contributed money, but once I handed it off, it’s all open now. He said the same thing a few times, and Isaac joined in. I responded that I was merely holding it out for whoever thought they should have it according to the rules; the implication being that people should self-police according to the rules as they operate here.

To short-circuit the debate, Isaac said, “just fucking with you,” and put his hand out for a quick friendly clasp. I was mollified by this friendly gesture, uncommon on the street. Usually, the mitigation never happened, as disagreements were taken as a personal affront to be confronted squarely and without any show of weakness. The tenor would change to a more personal attack and I often became frustrated, concerned more about being misunderstood than with the flow of the conversation. I inhabited this local need for respect, and was sensitive to finding my own self recognized and treated equally.

Isaac’s response was more typical of another thing however—the quick modification or small twisting in interchanges to claim an interpretation that served oneself. The point remained that he had not contributed and now managed to turn the conversation around into a session of “just fucking with” me. I found similar adjustments in other exchanges, an apprehension of the dialogue that allowed one to make claims that I did not see arising out of the conversation.

There was a tension wrought in the dispositions of Otis and the others, born of the insecure existence eking out a livelihood on the street. This attitude of vigilance and distrust was palpable in the subtlest of exchanges. I once reached for a cigarette Otis and
I were sharing that he held extended outward in his hand as he spoke to someone, his attention directed towards that person. His fingers swiftly stiffened in reflex, and he refused to let go of the cigarette until he finished talking, turned around and looked at me intently. Curious, I tried this with a few others, and it was the same every time. I could never simply take a cigarette out from between someone’s fingers, regardless if we were sharing it openly, I had bought it myself to share with others or their attention had been directed in an entirely different direction. They were always ready.

At the start of fieldwork, unsure what an Indian was doing moving into the neighborhood, most people who spent their day on the street avoided me and ignored my attempts at conversation. Slowly, a few began to speak with me, and a couple even began to seek me out for technical help with their gadgets. With Jamarcus, it began when he found a voice recorder similar to the one I carried. He walked up to me one day and asked me to put some music on it. When I returned the recorder to him filled with music he said, “I don’t know how to get to it, but I’ll check it out. Thank you,” much to the surprise of Rajinder, the South Asian who ran the convenience store. “Sir, yeh thank you bol gaya!” [Sir, he said thank you!] This was not in his nature in Rajinder’s experience. Usually, Jamarcus came into the store with an expression of condescending pain on his face, and threw money down on the counter and said, “give me a cigarette.”

A few days later, Jamarcus handed me the player again and requested more music. “Put Jay-Z and Kanye West on there,” he instructed. I handed it back to him and told him that I would do it soon, once I found the music he wanted. Jamarcus clucked in irritation. The very next day, he asked Rajinder to call me about putting music on his

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123 Jamarcus also worked as an independent on the boulevard; See chapter 5.
player. When I loaded more music for him later that day, he had difficulties playing it, and began pacing outside as I was conversing with others in the barbershop, with quizzical expressions and irritation written on his face. By the time I had finished getting him the music he wanted, the dynamic between us had become so distorted that it seemed the whole transaction was the other way around, and that I owed him something and was not fulfilling my responsibilities. After I explained how to access the music, Jamarcus did not say thank you; instead he just plugged in his headphones and walked away with an expression of frustration about the whole affair.

I frequently had similar encounters with others in the neighborhood, a perfect example of which was Ferric, the obese chef who lived in my building for a period of time before he was evicted. Sometimes Ferric would pound on the door to my apartment late at night, and when I asked him about it in the morning, would say with a straight face, “Oh, I just wanted a cigarette from you, don’t worry about it.” He did not care or seem to realize I was approaching him to ask him not to knock on my door at odd hours. Instead, Ferric would put on a faux magnanimity, forgiving me for not answering the door to provide him with free cigarettes. Often, if I was not available and he needed me, he would simply blithely instruct me by text that I should knock on his door and leave a cigarette outside for him. That I never complied with the request never dissuaded him from trying. Examples of such encounters abound.

What struck me in these moments quite apart from the lack of acknowledgment of a gift (of free cigarettes, demands for technical support, free music, or food, etc.) was the apprehension of the dialogue—always a little off center (the common sense, or seemingly sensible center), always twisted (with varying degrees of skill and blitheness) to suit
oneself, always with the projection of an oddly insecure entitlement in the form of magnanimity. When I confronted someone, making explicit the meta-dynamic as I saw it, the discussion only shifted towards resolution through a show of indulgence towards me, which diffused the issue rather than addressed it. The oddly insecure entitlement I speak of reminded me that I was encountering the effects of a universalized rhetoric in the United States, holding that hard work and individual effort were the only pre-requisites of success.

Something that ran through all these instances of exchange, the regular ones with Otis and the group, where they would share cigarettes, or contribute cash to participate in smoking a blunt, as well as the occasional situations with Ferric or Jamarcus, was an aggression that seemed to stem from anxiety about how the interaction might turn out. There was the vigilance that never allowed me to take a cigarette from a never-unguarded hand, even if I had bought that cigarette in the first place and it was going to be shared, a stiffening that never really eased except perhaps when Otis, Demaine or the others were safely asleep in bed (though many admitted they had trouble sleeping, often noting that one of the reasons they got high was so that they could sleep). This was born of a bodily disposition that was required on the street—one had to stand the right way on the street, one had to guard one’s eye movements and eye contact, one had to be aware of the police cars that could show up at any time, and one always had an awareness of the camera next to the bus stop, the permanently planted eye of surveillance, rotating in all directions and recording each and every move.

Perhaps related to this was the nervousness around exchange, an aggressive anxiety about getting as much as one could and also never being short changed, even
getting more out of them than was proportionate—be it in the money put up for alcohol or marijuana, help taken in taking one’s things up the stairs, be it the music that was inaccessible without someone who had a computer and an internet connection or 50 cents for a loose cigarette. Of course, everyone was short of money, a fact that had to be kept below the surface of social interaction but threatened to break out whenever there was a little friction in commensal exchanges.

Such moments of exchange were of a piece with the uncertainty that bred suspicion and vigilance on the street. No one wanted to project weakness, and this extended to acts of generosity. People mistake “kindness for weakness,” many of my interlocutors noted philosophically. A man might think you’re “a bitch” if they exchanged a few words and got a cigarette out of you. Being party to these exchanges, and especially the dyadic ones, created moments where I would be “pushed,” such as in the case of Jamarcus who could never be satisfied with the music I gave him or the technological assistance I provided him. There was always an apprehensive aspect to these interactions, because what I was asking for in return was not clearly assimilable.

More than a few times when I asked a question, Jamarcus would simply walk away because he was disoriented by a question about his past or present. Reticent because these things were not discussed, he could not always apprehend the equation between music and answers to questions, an equation which might have allowed him to become more comfortable with me. As a result, the suspicion that there was something else behind my gifts, some other kind of game I was playing, always lingered. The reasons for being cautious with me might be different, and there might never be a moment of complete ease.

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124 And I could easily be this man, because I did not hesitate to share food I had cooked, alcohol I might purchase, and contributions I might make to a pool for stoagies and blunts.
around me, but that was just how things were anyway, with everyone on the street. Nobody could really be anyone’s friend or trust completely.

From this diversion into the structure of mundane exchanges on the street, always apprehensive and alert, I return now to what was wrought by the daily lives of my interlocutors, and whether Otis’s articulations sustained them or not. Relative deprivation and a sense of menace combined to produce this conspiratorial, apocalyptic outlook that I have discussed in this chapter so far. Did a lasting group emerge around Otis, some kind of lasting structure that countered the state and society that had left them to their own devices?

The System Misfires

William turns to a different God

I met William after a four-month hiatus through the summer. He got in touch by text and asked me “what’s up.” Surprised by the text and then his phone call to follow up, I told William that I was free to hang out but we could not meet at my place that night. “O no, I’ll pick you up.” This became the first time William asked me to walk over to his house, and the first time he took me with him in the car, a truck that belonged to his father. “I have it for the evening, we about to go down the Ave and pick up this food Saleem (another of my interlocutors, a central protagonist of chapter The Invisible Door, and Honor) be cooking these days, then let’s go to my friend’s crib.”

It was a day of many firsts with William, who I shared a cordial relationship with, but still had never been in his car or outside his home. Add to that, I was not generally
invited to go further away from the block to meet other friends. Ali\textsuperscript{125} had explained this once, “aight you know you’re my nigger Kushiboo [me]. Thing is, there’s cats I’ll be with that might not respect you like I do, feel me?” I was still the rather odd Indian guy, and others in their circle might not appreciate my presence. They would be uncomfortable and at the same time might try to “punk me,” do the dozens or say insulting things and watch how I might respond. I had developed a rhythm of how to handle these moments with a sense of humor and mildly insulting pushbacks in the form of jokes that replicated the format of what they might say about me (if they said something about my glasses, I could make a joke about their eyes; if they said something about my height, I could make a joke about the size of their shoes, and so on). Still there was always the chance things might get out of hand, and they did not want things to turn physical; it would create a dilemma of whose side to take and how to defuse the conflict. Although Ali was the only one who told me this explicitly, I had been in these situations a few times. Of course, William’s background was different from Ali’s, to the extent that he had never been in the game, but the point remained. So I was quite surprised William and I were about to drive over to a friend’s apartment.

William’s friend lived in a one-room apartment in a large apartment complex. We parked a block away and walked over, vigilant as usual as we were not far from the “hood” nearby, and the apartment complex itself had seen some violence recently. On the way upstairs, another friend joined William.

When William refused the joint as his friend passed it to him, he must have noticed the surprise on my face, because he turned to look and tell me, “I’m not smoking

\textsuperscript{125} See chapter 5 for more on Ali.
now.” He noticed and held my quizzical look, smiled and nodded. I knew there was more to come. It was when we were on the roof, to smoke cigarettes, that William dropped the news on me.

Sipping our beers and talking about nothing in particular, William suddenly told me, “yeah, I got baptized.” I was stunned, and simply stared for a few seconds. When? (“a few months ago”). How come? (“I was in church with family on Sunday, and it just happened”). “Be blessed, congratulations, do you feel better!” I finally managed to say, still perplexed that this young man had found God. William was an attractive, eligible guy who regularly found new women to date. He had none of the obvious hindrances that held others back: he had a car, a working phone, was working regularly with a “CDL” (Commercial Driving License) which paid at least three times minimum wage, and in general was enjoying his youth.

William believed things were wrong with the world, and there was something behind the illusion of reality. He was one of those who believed that the culling might happen, that there were chem trails in the sky, that there were alien forces as well (he had seen a UFO as a child). Why did William need another explanation, another system of belief, another key to the mysteries of his world? Had the coherence offered by Otis’ discourse, a narrative that organized William’s experience in a relatable way, begun to misfire?

**Demaine’s withdrawal**

Last I saw Demaine was on a day he was walking up from further “down the hill,” deeper down the terrain that sloped downwards from Sleepytown into RapCity and on to the area where Irvington, Vailsburg, and RapCity intersected. He was walking slowly,
looking down on the street, clearly searching for something. His hands were grimy with what I noticed were stains of grease. I could see he was depressed and discouraged. Shoulders slumped, walking slower than usual (although he walks extremely slow in general, it is part of his swagger), t-shirt unwashed and old, and sweatpants that could do with being discarded. He reached me, we shook and embraced, and I asked him what he was searching for. “I just made twenty bucks fixing a car, looks like I dropped it.” I bought a “stogie,” a cigarette to cheer him up while we tried to retrace his steps. Had he taken the bus? (yes, but he was certain he felt the bill in his pocket as he got off) Did he brush past anyone? (no, but there was an old lady on the bus he had helped to get off the steps) Any chance he spent it? (no, he was planning to but had not had the chance). He did not seem too disappointed after a while, these things just happen.

Something was wrong. Demaine had trouble finding work. He had recently stopped working at the school as a teacher’s assistant, tired of the disorganization and limited reward for a lot of hard work. There had recently been a minor scandal over some older students kissing and making out in the men’s bathroom, someone had complained and the girl and two boys had met with the principal. Somehow Demaine’s name had come up, and he did not like the implication that he had something to do with it, especially because the words of some guilty kids were being given more credence over his own protestations to the contrary.

A few times at my apartment, Demaine had tried to figure out what he wanted to do, what he could do to make some more and steadier money. He claimed an interest in graphic arts, said he was great at sketching but school was too expensive. He even suggested he could sing and dance. Things were not looking good on the money front.
Most avenues that went through a college education along the way were closed. Having stayed and stagnated at the school job for too long, Demaine felt he was fast running out of options to revive his working life. “I’m 22 Kush, this can’t go on.”

I spoke to Mr. Johnson, an old gentleman I knew, and asked him if there was anything available and whether he would meet Demaine. We made his résumé, and I told Demaine to stay in touch so I could tell him when we had a date from Mr. Johnson. In the meantime, I ran into an ad in the paper about a free orientation session being held by General Motors for aspiring car mechanics. They promised pay for training and job placements after that. Demaine was passionate and knowledgeable about cars. He had recently helped a friend rebuild and start up an old jeep, and dabbled in customizing cars and repairing old cars. Surprisingly, even though he was very interested in cars and knew a lot about repairing and restoring them, he never did express a real interest in taking that up as a livelihood. I texted him about the job, but realized his phone had been disconnected when I got an automated response from the telephone service.

For the next few months until I left RapCity, I did not hear directly from Demaine again. His phone was down permanently it seemed, and all attempts to get word to him came to nothing. I later learned that Saleem had punched him in frustration. Saleem had given him some personal things to store for a few days. Apparently, someone stole the bag. A few days later, when Saleem asked him to return what he had given, Demaine just stood there, not saying a word to question after repeated question. Saleem finally told him to just tell him what happened. Still, Demaine was caught in some strange moment where speech had deserted him. Frustrated with his own troubles and Demaine’s intransigence,
Saleem swung at his cousin, cracking two of his own knuckles in the process. Demaine was not seen on the street again.

His friend Stanley speculated that “Demaine’s off that paranoid shit, he done gone off the reservation.” The fact that they were very close (“Stanley is my brother yo,” Demaine had told me more than once) made it seem odd to me, the dispassionate way in which Stanley speculated what might have happened. Perhaps he had seen it before, a failure of coherence that disrupted a person completely and prevented them from functioning normally. Stanley speculated that it might have been because of “bad weed,” marijuana that someone might have sprayed with some chemical. This was not uncommon, and people could have odd reactions to it. I could not get in touch with Demaine again, no matter how much I tried. With Stanley and others, I noticed eventually that they did not really want to expose Demaine to any social contact. A tacit glance while telling me they don’t have his number, an eloquent nod when I looked quizzical about their reticence: these were the cues I had that I should stop asking, and it probably had to do with Demaine’s state of mind, and perhaps even his express request to be left alone.

I later learned that Demaine had suffered a relapse of a stomach condition that caused severe ulcers and prevented him from eating most kinds of food. His mother had begun to restrict social contact with others, and Demaine seemed to have acquiesced, seeking security with the one person he could trust completely. I could not help but think that paranoia about his world had gone too far. Combined with the humiliation of Saleem’s attack, his frustrated search for work, perhaps he had really gone “off the reservation” as Stanley put it, lost the division he maintained between his beliefs of an
impending catastrophe and his ability to maintain his daily routine without this belief in forces conspiring against him crippling his articulation, his mundane forms of communication with an employer, a friend, a person who sold him marijuana and those working at the store where he might buy a cold drink or a loose cigarette. The narrative he had constructed, and Otis was certainly relevant here, to explain the world and his position in it to himself, had silenced him in the process of failing him—it did not provide a form of action, a way to communicate, when circumstances obliterated his erstwhile ability to communicate nonetheless, whether it be with me on the phone or a visit to my apartment, or to Saleem when he misplaced the bag. He withdrew to his home and to his mother, seeking safety and some form of recovery.

**Conclusion: Paranoid thoughts about the Social**

Haunted sensibilities track unwanted influences and veiled threats in idioms of addiction, dead ends, and conspiracy, while dreams of transcendence and recluse set afloat reckless hopes of winning or escape. Anxiety ranges without object. [Stewart 2007:94]

How does a young black man understand and explain his deprivation and disenfranchisement in society which professes itself egalitarian, one in which all of its members get their just desertes? What forms of relationships does he create between experience and event, social position and promise? How does such a man articulate and affirm himself with the resources given him, when these resources are so few and wanting? How does he square his individual situation with the promise he was given in the ‘Land of the Free’ dedicated to the pursuit of happiness when all around him he sees unfreedom and unhappiness? What “coherent ideology of daily living” (Fortes 1953:18) must he subscribe to, a cluster of basic ideas about causation, rules of behavior, the
explanation of the world? What happens when he hears rumblings of a crisis in this state he is part of but excluded from, a cataclysm in a financialized economy at whose periphery he offers whatever surplus can be extracted from his body and his work? In what floating signifier must he invest the surplus of meaning so he might find truth if not justice, (temporary) relief if not happiness? What effect is produced from a daily experience of fear and threat? Like a permanently running fever that surges in intensity, what do the stories of Otis have to do with the daily experience of menace and endangerment, being in a state of siege, a perennial state of emergency (Taussig 1989)?

It is the argument of this chapter that the logic and structure of witchcraft discourse explains an equally fantastic reality, equaling the mirages and spectacle of capitalism in its fantastic excesses, offering imaginative resources that facilitate a kind of tenuous aversion and delay of an existential crisis that threatens Otis and his followers at every step of their often dread-filled lives, right in the heartland of capitalism. Further, witchcraft discourse refers to a force or power that is beyond the political and the social, not definable in terms of extant political, scientific, or sociological conceptions.

The suspicions of Otis and his friends, and the narrative that Otis created to confirm those suspicions and give them structure, were based on a palpable sense of discontent and a premonition that things in their lives will not work out well. They were all in the United States, the land of great promise and happiness, but the odds seemed stacked against them. There seemed no clear line between their experience and its explanation. The system that produced their situation could be felt, but was not comprehensible in a satisfying way. Otis offered coherence, a story, an explanation of
sorts; and the others filled in with their own confirmatory ideas. Demaine heard about the “impending blackout,” William had seen a UFO when he was a kid, and was now transporting truckloads of ordinance to the border, Rick discovered that Hitler was a Jew. It was all connected, it all seemed to come together somehow, to coalesce, to make sense. It was a dramatic story, a partial answer to their troubles (Kluckhohn 1962 [1944]).

And yet, the articulation of this story around their suspicions did not bring relief from the tenuousness and tension of their daily lives. Something unknowable pressed for expression; articulation of the unknown in paranoid suspicions did not satisfy the need for expression. An inchoate pressure compelled speech because it threatened absolute silence, death. Something indefinable found expression in suspicions; yet this speech did not grasp it definitively, articulate it in a form that was available for judgment. It could not be spoken and yet was. Speech could not contain experience and the pressure built again, pressing for expression. The sense of menace never eased long enough.

The structure of paranoid conspiracy theories, responding to a perceived imminent and catastrophic threat, mirrors that of suspicions of witchcraft. As it has evolved historically, conspiracy theory in the twentieth century finds purchase amongst those who are unconvinced by extant explanations of the state of the world, or perceive a threat to an idealized social order. Dissatisfied with systemic explanations, or accounts that provide benign understandings of unfortunate events, conspiracy theories appeal to the binary division of the world into good and evil, simultaneously harbingering total battles towards the final outcome (Stewart and Harding 1999), and disparaging the slow movement of reform and social change. They cut through the complexity of life and its

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126 See Lévi-Strauss (1963a) for a discussion of the value offered by a coherent system, and the investment in the confirmation of the truth of this system over notions of justice, coherence, or complete knowledge.
discontents, offering a clarity that comes at the easy expense of the complexity that a scholar might appreciate, also a complexity with which person who has ‘succeeded’ in the system might feel no need to engage (an established member of the middle class that has no cause to question the system because she or he has done well for themselves; but note that even among the most reasonable, one could easily find a loosely held conviction that, say, John F. Kennedy’s death was the outcome of a conspiracy). No longer a fringe phenomenon simply attributed to the “tin-foil hat wearing” marginal person, conspiracy theories today threaten to take over the landscape of the fractured political and public discourse in the United States (Hofstadter 1996 [1965]; Kay 2011).

Today, men without the power of special sight become excited in the face of power in Cameroon (Geschiere 1997). People seek succor in healing services as they suffered under economic insecurity and the threat of invisible forces, while government leaders struggle to reconcile the incompatibility of ‘modern’, ‘democratic’ regimes with the persistence of knowledge systems that Westerners find tinged with “superstition” and “backwardness” (Ashforth 2005). The state enacts its own fears and fantasies in this flux, finding an uncanny power in the “criminal” that it seeks to posses (Siegel 1998). Everyone, irrespective of age, gender or social location becomes the possible source of death, a peril that is not eased despite a spate of killings in the wake of the end of a regime (Siegel 2006).

The United States is no stranger to panic about social order translating into accusations of occult practice. The emergence of diversity in the newly settled white society produced a spate of accusations as far back as the trials in Salem (Erikson 1966). This is an apt moment to clarify how the structure of witchcraft is being applied here.
Naturally, I am not referring to witches flying by on brooms at night, nor to contemporary practices of Wicca in the United States, which belong with the cluster of New Age spirituality. It is more about the structure of meaningfulness that emerges out of Otis’s and others’ narratives, their tale of conspiracy, and the feeling of threat they perceive from unknown forces that were in turn named or personified amorphously as the powers that be, as the third person plural “they.” In general, material insecurity in uncertain times breeds spiritual (or even existential) insecurity, and hidden forces seem to be at work, conspiring in ways unseen against the individual. Witchcraft—in the strictest sense—is absent, but its structure, its form of explanation, its emergence from fear and its inability to resolve social and existential tensions obtained on this street corner.

For Otis and his friends, unable to explain being “fallen” (Stewart 1996) in a world that rhetorically lauds itself as egalitarian and just, a suspicion that something is wrong and a feeling of menace and impending doom causes ideas that did not conform to ‘reason’ or ‘logic’ to appear all too true and logical. And there is a pleasure too (Stewart 2007), in channeling this power that resists discursive control, that remains inassimilable. It threatens, but Otis engages because this power excites him, this fraction of insight he has into something he only understands a part of. His story gave an answer to what troubled them, and did so in a dramatic register.

No matter the function of witchcraft, in explicating social conflict or as an organizing idiom for responses to flux in society and economy, it begins with words used to express misfortune. Witchcraft is most importantly materialized in words (Siegel 2006, Favret-Saada 1980) and is therefore useful to understand Otis and others’ articulations and position. Although in many contexts an efficacy is attributed to the exact ceremonial
procedures to be followed through which someone is brought into the field of malicious force, the critical element from this perspective is language, words themselves. This discursive structure of witchcraft allows us to consider the state of being bewitched (by whom? by what?) as a logic for understanding the system behind Otis’ words about his accidental position and that of others, outside the orbit of the ‘Powers that Be’, shut out of the centers of power that define and control social reality. Witchcraft indicates a pattern of repeated misfortune, which is one possible way the lives of Otis, Demaine and many others could be characterized. A conspiratorial explanation of the frustrations and powerlessness they face, the opaque nature of the world before them, satisfies the need for origins (and not merely the causes) for their misfortune. the source of menace is inchoate, unarticulable for Demaine and his friends, an unclear sense of an external force that is threatening them. Otis provides them with a language, and a narrative, that organizes their fears and suspicions (Lévi-Strauss 1963b). This accounts for his domination of the group. But does this bring peace, lasting relief, or promise the creation of a structure, a stable hierarchy around Otis?

This importance of words, of language and articulation, is significant for the interpretation I advance for another reason. Just as in other societies the accusations and resolutions of witchcraft accusations offered only tenuous and temporary relief, here as well no stable hierarchy eventually emerged around Otis, no enduring grouping is formed. The very inchoate nature of the negativity that threatened them meant that the menace continued to return, no matter how Otis’ words and those of others may try to express, collate, circumscribe, contain, and control it.
Temporary Relief

When the school shootings in Newtown were being animatedly discussed on the street, Superstorm Sandy was around the corner. When the storm passed, a blackout, planned and staged by the government and carrying with it the risk of a nuclear catastrophe, was not far behind. The menace keeps returning. Connected to these were other sources of fear, associated specters—Planned Parenthood as a permanent agency of killing black babies, Newtown and debates on gun control a harbinger of the disarmament of black people before the Culling, gay rights as the onset of the end of heterosexual sex and hence of reproduction and, eventually, the human species. This aspect of a repeated return of the menace without any final resolution, of the inability of a story of witchcraft to bring relief (often left to the side in fine researches that also seek some form of confirmation for, or recognition of, or assert the rationality of these practices within their cultural context) was the same with the creative narratives of Otis and his friends.

The universe remained filled with menace, and police and ambulance sirens sound their alarm regularly, part of the mundane atmosphere of vigilance around Otis and the others. A quiet, sunny morning at the beginning of spring, a lilt and lightness to Demaine’s walk, glad to be meeting the others for a social gathering; one look up at the sky, a chem trail sighting, and the day would be tinged. Not to say that the boys could not continue to enjoy the day, talk, share a smoke, play some beats on a phone and rap over them; but the sign in the sky of the coming apocalypse would always elicit a comment or two before we could move on, the mood returning to upbeat but tinged nonetheless with the slumping of shoulders, the agitation of speech (“that shit is out there again yo”)—the feeling was the same again but changed. They were caught up, perennially bewitched.
The specific reason or concrete content for this failure of a witchcraft accusation to bring relief varies: in Indonesia at the time of Suharto’s removal, it was the unknowability of who might be the witch (Siegel 1997). Amongst the Zande it was the pervasiveness of the possibility of witchcraft which no individual oracle and no individual act of unwitching through ignorant confession (if it is me, I apologize, I had no intention of bewitching) could permanently remove (Evans-Pritchard 1937). How individuals are identified as suspected witches is unclear among the Western Apache as well (Basso 1969). In the situation of Otis and his acolytes, the perennial absence of the witch—an egalitarian, modern society that faced them with both the lack of power and no ritual structure to effect an ‘unwitching’ if only for the moment, coupled with the conviction that it was the social itself that was doomed—created a permanent state of feeling a sense of threat, one that was “the normal” for Otis.

The witch could not become a personified entity in this apocalyptic worldview. Sure, there were the ‘Powers that Be’, conspiring to destroy them all, but they were a weak and ineffective substitute for what we see in other social systems such as Cameroon, Indonesia, the Navaho, peasant France, or anywhere else witchcraft is either integrated into the social, or at minimum acknowledged. Depending on the context, witchcraft is then contested over as a problematic of a postcolonial, democratic, modernizing state, or as a symptom of unknown threats that endanger the community, the family or the individual. In addition, the scale of the conspiracy story—one that promised the end for 95% of the world’s population through the Culling—militated against any hope. The best one could hope for, as Otis did in his discussions of learning to grow
plants and vegetables and generate his own electricity, or evolving to survive on air alone, was to individually survive the apocalypse that would destroy society.

At least one author has tried to theorize the onset of Christian Colonialism, or modernity itself, as a form of occult violence visited upon black people from outside their societies, culminating in the African-American presence in the United States through slave trade (Perkinson 2005). DuBois’s double consciousness and second sight and forms of creative practice such as black music are proposed as a kind of shamanistic remedy practiced by black folk to recover from the destruction of their origin myths. While there is metaphoric conceptualization of shamanism deployed in this work, there is indeed something about capitalism that is fantastic to those submerged in its practices, but who lack sufficient capital of any kind—social, symbolic, or economic—to avoid becoming critical of it. A life of struggle, physically and economically precarious and uncertain, is almost naturally inducing of critical questions about the world, especially in a non-hierarchical, “we are all middle class,” egalitarian society. Given a middle class background, a mortgage, a car and electronic appliances, I doubt Otis would have had cause to question the world and his place in it. Instead, he lived in a basement room, lacked anything but occasional access to the Internet, had no private means of transportation, and did not have a TV set. He neither had a bank account nor any savings to place in it. He did not have a retirement plan. He was excluded from the world of income accumulation, consumption, asset building and investment. At best, he was only

127 But for at least one element—destruction or loss of origin myths—see Nadel (1952) for a comparison of the Korongo, who seem to have no need for witchcraft because they have an all inclusive mythology covering the causes of life, misfortune and death, and a detailed age grade structure which allows for an understanding of life stages and the life cycle (enabling a rather more cheerful coping with transitions from youth to married life on to old age) with the Mesakin who, lacking such a picture of the universe seem more plagued by anxieties and insecurity. The latter resonate with the situation of Otis and others, who are given the Horatio Alger myth, but find it nowhere to obtain in, or explain, the reality of their lives.
visible as another “black male,” a threat to the social order and a source of political and prison capital.

Of course, when the state itself seems to conjoin reason with violence, the fantastic is already plausible (Taussig 1992). While Favret-Saada (1987) discusses the incompatibility of state violence and magical violence (witchcraft), I am considering the possibility of the two realms being confounded (to be clear: not made compatible, but confounded) in current mass incarcerating neoliberal capitalism, such that state violence appears, or might as well be, magical violence. One has no prospects of a legal livelihood that will offer the things a job promises, and is driven to commit daily acts of criminality. Unlike robbery, a forcible deprivation of someone else’s property, selling what are termed Controlled and Dangerous Substances is an act of non-coercive exchange with a buyer. It is a market activity in this sense. At the same time, being in the market does not bring the wealth that is promised to all, because this activity is illegitimate according to the laws of the state. Otis’s theories of the coming apocalypse depend first and foremost on a suspicion that things are not as they appear, combined with a menace, a sense of personal vulnerability. A financial crisis flashes, but is a non-event for someone who fears more the magical violence of the state with its police cars and ubiquitous video cameras. The world remains fantastic, money and markets remain opaque. His stories seem to touch the power that induces fear in himself and amongst those who circle in his orbit, this channeling bringing him adherents and allowing for him to dominate certain social situations. Yet, just like witchcraft, which depends on suspicion but only ends up keeping “suspicion alive by introducing a term—‘witch’—that is incapable of doing more than designating that something is at work which is not understood…” (Siegel
Otis’s stories do not resolve things once and for all. Brethren continue to get locked up, the crisis and recession continue to visit structural problems on people, one of whose consequence is a heightened fear of crime and of black males. In turn, the state ratchets up the mass incarceration machinery that offers uncertain relief to the middle class members of the community in Sleepytown (see chapter 1), and improves capital circulation in the markets through private prison enterprises and injection of further federal dollars into the economy. This is where markets, state, and a magical violence become confounded, bleeding into one another in a way that is apprehended only by Otis and others in his position.

A political consciousness does not emerge from this critical outlook. In fact, no stable group emerges around men like Otis (pace the “misfiring of the system” as William gets baptized and Demiane withdraws) or Haider (see chapter 5) in this corner of neoliberal mass incarcerating U.S. In both this chapter and chapter 5, we speak of the failure of a group, of ‘a social’ to emerge. On one side, Otis’s system misfires, and on the other, no system is ever meant to emerge out of Haider’s moments of glory which include his return to jail, defiantly preparing marijuana for consumption on an NJ Transit train. Haider is only winning to become the lost one, lost to his family and the street as he adds to the number of bodies required for the prison to flourish.

A Myth of Origin

Otis presented a moving collage of disparate stories, and sometimes the myth most clearly articulated\textsuperscript{128} was in the personage of the Rockefeller family.\textsuperscript{129} Of course,

\footnote{128}{Or rather, the clearest narrative that conformed to the idea of an originating conspiracy myth; see Cubitt (1989).}
this story of the Rockefellers was largely a response to my questioning, my badgering of him in moments when he was relaxed about when it all began, who was behind the curtain, and so on.

Otis’s view put conventional ideas off center. From government to gravity, his viewpoint meant the construction of a different story about the world around him. Juxtaposed with the “normal” world of working people, money and cars—the world of the place that he existed in—he still was able to imagine and invent the narrative that spoke of inevitable destruction, that told others what was really going on. This is what placed him off system (his explanations put the system in question), and also made him necessary to completing the system. Without Otis there could be no imagination of an explanation; he “abreacted” the proliferation of meaning in the minds of those around him, enabling them to deal with “the universe [which] is never charged with sufficient meaning and in which the mind always has more meanings available than there are objects to which to relate them” (Levi-Strauss 1963:184).

This narrative did two things. First, it made his position one of negativity and excess: Otis’ story, if true, would destroy the world. It placed him “off system,” at the same time as it made him necessary to completing the system. Secondly, both the narrative, as well as the fact that it provided only temporary relief implied a recursive circle, a spiral within which Otis and his acolytes oscillated, as it were. The oscillation

129 The Rockefellers came to this country in the 1930s, and at that time, they “sent out their sons to different lands” to make contacts with other “powerful people,” and organize them into an order that seeks to turn all humans into slaves as soon as they are born. Herein lay the tenuous origins of the group behind the New World Order, preparing, per the Georgia Stones, for the destruction of 95% of humankind.

130 This image of circularity in ever widening or narrowing spirals along with the back and forth movement implied by oscillation seems crude and contradictory (circle and pendulum) once written down, but has
was between naming (articulating the threat in a narrative structure) and the failure of this naming, a pendulum swing between these two poles that trapped, at the same time as it freed, Otis and his acolytes.

I realized that Otis himself did not find clarity and coherence from this story about the Rockefellers; it was for me. Otis might himself be searching for a concrete coherent story, one that will complete the system and cover everything. However, the story of the Rockefellers did not fulfill that function of truth (Lévi-Strauss 1963). Yet one more reaching for a word, just as Demaine did with Freemasons, it was another search for what might complete the system of meanings that their minds produced; a search for the magic copula, the word that might do more than ‘Powers that Be’. Demaine sounded more convinced by placing his faith in truth behind the Freemasons, but even he did not really believe it, this word did not bring him respite. So, although they talked about it when I pressed them for an answer to how it all began, present me with an attenuated origin myth, something continued to press on them, urging more stabs at the reality in front of them. Flat earth was the latest that Otis generated, and it brought him great release and a manic joy. Only, I suspect, for a while.

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helped me visualize the situation of Otis and his friends and how their daily routine with its celebratory (we know what is happening to us) yet premonitory (we are going to die) punctuations operated.

131 See Cubitt (1989) for whom the idea of a conspiracy myth, activated and updated in the present, does indeed provide this relief of truth. My argument brings conspiracy together with the negativity expressed in witchcraft, and is different as a result.
A Separation

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. [Berlant 2011:1]
The delusional formation, which we take to be the pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction. [Freud 1911:70]

Stella

Stella often scurries about like a rabbit, filled with energy. She is of average height. Although she is white, Stella has a kind of “perma-tan,” rendering her skin varying hues at different times of the year. Light eyes, a small nose and thin lips in an oval face with high cheekbones. Straight, firm shoulders frame a petite body maintained through regular exercise. She likes to dress in style, quite particular about accessories and clothing. When her last husband Doug described seeing her the first time to me, he recalled being instantly drawn to her. They were soon in touch, and were married after dating for some time. Doug is about ten years younger than Stella. She liked Doug because his movements and body language were very “non-white, you know, not so stiff and macho” but softer and more fluid. This is what, she claimed, also drew her in general to non-white, “international” people (although she has only married North American men). At one point, she (and Doug, who moved into her house after marriage) had four cats, but now only two remain. They have no children together.

The day I first met her, she was wearing a hat. We were at a rally against cuts in positions and benefits for teachers proposed by the governor of the state. The atmosphere was festive, complete with a live band, speeches on stage streamed on two large screens
for the crowd that had been bused in, informational stalls handing out brochures, and food stalls selling burgers and snacks.

As the band played “We’re not gonna take it,” a reporter from a news website began talking to me. We began talking about the political implications of the financial crisis and ensuing recession, which he turned into an interview. We shifted to Q&A mode a few moments before the national anthem was sung and continued to speak as it blared out of the loudspeakers. A large white man approached us. He was about 45 years old, short haired, clean-shaven, and wearing a round neck red t-shirt. Although we had lowered our volume and had only exchanged a few words, I gestured to my interviewer to pause. Instead, he defiantly shook his head and continued to speak. The man in the red t-shirt, hand still on heart, thrust his face towards us. I had read the manifesto of the group that ran the website he was reporting for, so I could see the journalist believed he did not need to change his behavior because somebody else wanted to sing or stand silent for the national anthem. At this sign of head-shaking defiance from this internationalist news reporter who did not believe in national boundaries, he stepped even closer, eyes wide open and pushing his upper body towards us, glancing downward to his hand placed on his heart. I told my interviewer that we should stop to respect the man’s pious feelings. The journalist kept shaking his head, indicating he could not fathom any good reason to stop talking. Nonetheless, I felt compelled to repeat my request to placate this agitated patriot, and the journalist finally accepted, now shaking his head at me instead of the man, disappointed that I had written for his website and yet would engage in such craven pandering to nationalist feelings. Once the national anthem was complete, the patriot jabbed a finger in our direction. “**Now** you have freedom of speech,” he said, returning to
us our liberties before he walked away. We exchanged a few more questions and answers about the recession, the journalist took my photograph for the news article, and we said goodbye.

Near the end of the rally, I stood off to one side to gather some final impressions from this gathering of activists, advocacy groups, action-oriented non profits, and teachers and families. As it turned out, a lady happened to be standing close to me.

I am not sure exactly how the conversation began; I remember sensing someone was looking at me at the same time as I turned towards the gaze. She was dressed in a red sweater, wearing steel colored glasses and a short haircut underneath her hat. In her hand and clasped to her side, she was holding what looked like the smaller size newspaper or periodical that activist organizations publish. This one had yellowish newsprint with a bright red masthead: “The Clash.”¹³² She smiled at me and I smiled back. “We publish this newspaper,” she said as she approached, in a tone indicating she had done this a few times today and that I might have received a few similar approaches in the last few hours. After all, activists had gathered to make a statement, and in the ambience of choice, were presenting their varied wares for examination and potential engagement. She explained she worked for the group that published this paper, their goal was to publish news with a critical perspective. It was sold for whatever price one would be willing to pay. I smiled again, took a copy and gave her a dollar. I noticed she did not refer to the group too

¹³² Name changed. For more on this newspaper, see Chapter 4.
directly. It was simply “we.”\textsuperscript{133} I learned some time later that this group was called the COS.

“You seem pretty international,” she said as we made the exchange. It could have been a way to indicate that I was “foreign,” to convey that I did not look like I was from the United States. I wondered if she wanted to avoid trying a more specific identification, based on nationality or some other attribute, not ‘make a guess’ going by my physical features, voice or accent. Later I thought perhaps it had to do with the internationalism of the group she belonged to; we were all international, in that there should be no nations in the utopia they envisaged.

I told her I am here from India, studying cultural anthropology and researching the financial crisis and recession in the United States. On hearing this, she perked up and told me there are a lot of difficulties in the area where she lives. On the lookout for a fieldsite, I perked up too, and she wrote her email address on the margin of the newspaper. I would soon learn that this woman who scurried like a rabbit had the heart of a lion.

**Stella’s Politics**

At the time we met, Stella worked part-time in a small outpatient clinic. Prior to that, she worked in a public sector job, from where she retired a few years ago. She received a pension from this job. Her employment there had begun before the aggressive

\textsuperscript{133} Later I would learn this was an ongoing dilemma about how “open” the group wanted to be. They had recently decided to be more explicit and expressive about who they were and what they wanted to achieve, but remained apprehensive about surveillance. In general, during my fieldwork they took their time before revealing their mission fully. Recently, however, I heard a group member announce their name and agenda to a group of churchgoers after screening a film on anti-immigrant racism. This dynamic between secrecy and revelation was very much part of the significance each member and the group as a whole derived from their existence (Simmel 1906).
attacks on pensions and other entitlements in the Reagan era of privatization and disinvestment in public infrastructure, the attack on social welfare benefits during the Clinton administration, or in the wake of the financial crisis. Keith, another member of the COS experienced the shredding of job security and benefits for teachers and other public servants. Missing the newly imposed required years of service (a threshold that determined who would have their future benefits reduced and who would not) by 18 months, his pension had been retrospectively reduced as part of the new austerity; a completely arbitrary and unexpected change that put a lot of pressure on his future plans for his children. Older than Keith by about 15 years, Stella belonged to the post-war generation of workers from the last age of U.S. industrial prosperity, when middle class mobility was a concreted possibility and not merely an aspirational ideal. Capitalism had secured her future before it entered the post-industrial phase in the United States.

Stella’s third husband Doug worked in the private sector and did not fare so well. During the “dotcom” boom of the late nineties, his job as the digital manager for a major news weekly was cut, and he had been without steady employment ever since. He did freelance photography and photo art since then. The kind of work he did ranged from “a gig at the Museum of Modern Art, to a birthday party for some fancy people. There’s very little work now. Most people think they can do it all themselves, you know,” Stella told me. Following in Stella’s footsteps, her daughter Helen also worked in a clinical job in the public sector, an occupation that the group they both belonged to endorsed. It was a way to propagate their ideas and win new adherents. Helen would receive a layoff notice in 2011.
After a few abortive attempts after our encounter at the rally, Stella and I finally had a long conversation on the phone: my first interview with her. After a few preliminaries, I asked her about conditions in her neighborhood after the financial crisis and recession. For the next fifteen minutes, with barely a word from me, Stella embarked on a breathless account that jumped from issue to issue, back and forth through the decades of the twentieth century. I had to prompt Stella again to tell me about her neighborhood and the recession, the question I had initially asked.

Stella’s soliloquy on the current Situation

What we see today started with [Ronald] Reagan, when they fired the air traffic controllers in the early nineties, probably the oil crisis in 1975 when the US went off the Gold Standard. We didn’t see then what it signified. It was a bubble, o, but bubble is not the right word, a crisis. Like we saw with the dotcom crisis of the 1990s——In the seventies, a lot of state money went into prison construction, I’m talking mainly about New York and California, [they] arrested a lot of people for minor drug charges. Lots of minority people, because they saw unemployment coming. Somebody’s been looking at this big overall picture.

Today, the economy is not doing real work, it is being driven by stocks and bonds, like housing in 2000. Then, after 9/11, all this money was spent on war. Before that, Clinton was getting ready for all that, with cutbacks. I remember school lunches; people started eating all this McDonald’s, little nuggets. The food became crap, we saw kids dropping out of the breakfast program, kids that were dressed better than mine. I remember, there was this little girl in first grade, she could read New York Times, fourth grade level, she was a black kid, you (hear people) say ‘o, you know, they can’t learn.’ Come on! I’ve been in the same school for 27 years; I saw it go down with the economy…. This country has not served its working class.

[Switching back to food, nutrition and diet] Appalachia, Mississippi, Alabama, the South, they feed people a lot of sugar. There is a lot of Coke [Coca Cola]. [switching back to “this country” again] United States was on top of the world at the end of the Second World War, a creditor nation… changes such as the GI Bill, and the New Deal made [President Franklin] Roosevelt look good. It was just propaganda.… We had Jim Crow, we had segregation … Labor unions became very Republican because they were scared of communists … these battles are good or we wouldn’t have social security… whatever is won, is taken back.
[President Barack] Obama has not done anything to what insurance and pharmaceutical companies do. It seems as if he has taken big chunks out of Medicaid, and it’s going to come out of the common man’s pocket [because] a lot of doctors wouldn’t even touch it [state mandated healthcare], because the reimbursement is so low. [This experience] reminds me of immigration laws… more anti-public resolutions have been passed under him in the last year than under George Bush’s administration… He sounds like a fascist, he really is. When you’re a fascist with a black face, you can say things [George W.] Bush can not (emphasis added). But other [powerful nations] can see behind his black skin. He’s green. I didn’t vote. My husband voted for him. He also doesn’t like Obama now.

Beginning with Ronald Reagan’s economics of austerity and his attacks on labor, Stella leaped forward to the dotcom boom and bust of the late 1990s, conjoining the two moments with “crisis.” For Stella a crisis had existed for a long time, well before the historic financial crisis of 2007. Given her political outlook, capitalism simply lurched from one crisis to another, perpetually. This crisis-ridden state meant that there was always a possibility for collapse, and for radical change.

Stella observed that the state had been preparing the ground for mass incarceration, especially of minorities. This was a concerted effort by “somebody looking at this big overall picture.” We turned then to the economy’s separation from “real work,” the wars in the name of terror in the twenty first century, and the impact of austerity during the nineties on food in school. After a quick attack on racist stereotypes about the inherent inability of African Americans, Stella pronounced the verdict that the United States has not worked for its working people. Promptly she returned to food and nutrition in places remote from her, and then returned yet again to the once exalted status of the United States. Finally, her criticism of two presidents, one past, and one present bookended a laundry list: she name checked segregation and the Jim Crow laws without
any elaboration, claimed the country was not a democracy, and pointed to a change in the perspective of labor unions during the 1940s as the origin of decline, as the unions became “very Republican” in the face of the Socialist and Communist threat. Abruptly, she concluded, “these battles are good, or we wouldn’t have social security,” before somberly observing, “whatever is won, is taken back.” Following this rich interlude of moments, most remarkable were her concluding observations on Barack Obama and the surprising claim that he is a fascist. Apart from his inaction on healthcare and his attacks on immigrants, Stella cited U.S. activities in Pakistan, Yemen, Afghanistan as further evidence of the lack of change in U.S. policy, foreign or domestic, under Obama.

I could barely process these rapid changes in topic and mood, references mixing banal observations with politico-historical analysis. It was almost as if Stella was telling me what she always intended to tell someone; a sense that she was speaking from a generalized script that expressed how things were wrong in the world and that capitalism, specifically its U.S. variant, was the cause for it all. Internationalism, a hidden answer she would reveal later, was the solution to this problem. On reflection and as I learned more about Stella and her political group, this was not so remarkable; I was a potential recruit. Further, I was younger and thus indexed the future, as well as being “international.”

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134 I did note that her comment on the economy being driven by stocks and bonds indicated an understanding of this change towards financialization in the economy. However, I learned this change was immaterial for Stella and her group.

135 And I should note here that in its general outlines and its content, this viewpoint is not ‘incorrect.’ Here, I merely want to draw attention to this wide ranging response to what was a narrower, more specific question about Stella’s own neighborhood and her experience there. For a discussion of why a language of class war, bosses and workers, oil, inter-imperialist rivalry persists, that is, what are the sources, uses and benefits of this terminology for this collective, see Chapter 4.

136 Note on Punctuation: New paragraphs in the Text Box are introduced to make the reported speech more readable, except in the final paragraph, as Stella paused (indicated by suspension points at the end of the
Once she had exhausted this flurry of thoughts, I asked Stella where she lives, and reminded her of my original question; she had not spoken about her neighborhood at all.

Sleepytown, kind of a nice neighborhood, you know, it’s not the most expensive. Its just one block from RapCity … whatever, I would prefer to live in RapCity. The water is better in RapCity. [I have spent] half my life in New Jersey, no, most of it. I like where I’m at, its very integrated; people from, different backgrounds…different ethnicities; where I lived earlier, near Chicago, it wasn’t very diverse, and I didn’t like that…. On my block, they hide that fact that 8-9 houses are vacant. They don’t talk about it. It’s really hidden. Poverty is hidden. Only thing media is showing, ‘o, things are improving.’

After criticizing the media, Stella did note that not since the Vietnam War had there been such coverage of “murders that are going on.” She was not referring to casualties of combat but of livelihoods, of jobs being lost. She asked if I had heard of “Roger and Me,” a movie by Michael Moore (I had not), told me it was a very good movie and her voice tailed off without further elaboration, as mention of the war in Vietnam seemed to remind Stella of her own radicalization.

In the middle of the 1960s Stella had started to feel that all was not right with the world. She told me she began reading some newspapers, that she has tried to stay aware of current affairs since then, and fired one final salvo before our conversation drew to a close.

National Guardian was a newspaper that published the truth. Since then I always look for something that’s more profound. I [try to] keep abreast,

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This paragraph on integration is crucial for the argument foreshadowed in Chapter 1. She had encounter with the “other side” during her work, but eventually the revolution fails because it is not able to bring this intentional community into being, to cross this divide. The COS is not alone here; in the wake of the 1967 urban riots, the largely middle class civil rights activists also recognized they had little connection with the urban poor black community.
sometimes I can, sometimes not so well… Well for me, here’s the bottom line, inter imperialist rivalry that United States is coming up against, there is going to be another World War. So it is spending a lot of money to secure itself against Japan, China, Russia——maybe India. Money we could spend on our kids’ education, on health. I see more and more ‘FOR SALE’ signs, many people are living in rented houses. I will tell you more when we talk again.

It was when we spoke a few months later that Stella explicitly addressed her membership in a group called the COS. She answered the phone with a smile in her voice: “Hi, Kartikeya, how are you!” Pleasantly surprised that she had saved my number and spoke my name with such confidence, I asked how things were. Stella’s husband Doug had been a little sick, and she herself had some eye surgery and vision correction. “My organization has been having a lot of activities and gatherings. At one of them, there were people of 13 nationalities… remind me again what country you are from? [We are] beginning to get quite big, yeah.” Stella told me the goal of their group is to have one world without borders, and an egalitarian society. The word “revolution” was mentioned in a tone of positive hope and desire.

My interactions with Stella and the COS intensified rapidly. Wary of being under surveillance, the COS is somewhat self-consciously and demonstratively secretive and wary of interacting with outsiders. Having assured herself that I was not a government agent trying to infiltrate her group, Stella finally invited me to a group meeting she often held at her home. The prediction of a coming World War that Stella made as the climactic moment of our conversation on the phone, titillating me with its apocalyptic-utopian ambience, was only made explicitly when new visitors, potential

138 Not surprisingly, I had noticed that pronouncing my name often caused some difficulty for speakers of U.S. English. The sound of the fourth letter ‘t’ does not really exist in English and was likely inaudible; it was converted it to ‘t’ as heard in “Tom.” In general, it was not uncommon for people to simply start referring to me as “you” without an attempt at repeating my name.

139 For more on the COS see chapter 4.
initiates, were being given some general outlines of the COS vision and mission. Otherwise, this prophesy forms an unspoken backdrop to discussions that were centered around articles in The Clash (the COS’s newspaper that I bought from Stella at the protest rally), but sometimes included materials from mass market paperbacks or write-ups prepared by members and approved for discussion by the COS. A violent upheaval, inevitable and (hopefully) imminent, would pave the way for the COS to lead the salvation of all humanity. They will be at the vanguard, ushering in the revolution and creating the global utopia.

Meetings were generally expected to coincide with publication of the latest issue of The Clash, a bi-weekly newspaper and the mouthpiece of the COS. It formed the core of the group’s ‘belief-sustaining work,’ given its limited presence and sporadic recruitment. Stella organized and conducted such meetings with élan, ensuring maximum participation from the four to six regular members. She would contact each person with a request to bring a food item so there was enough to eat and adequate variety, that coffee and water were plentiful, and discussions moved at a good pace. Occasionally, we would turn the gathering into a full scale lunch, eating and having beer or wine once the latest issue of The Clash had been perused and the main articles discussed. Membership dues and voluntary contributions were collected during the meeting. It was a sober yet cordial gathering of like-minded people, offering a form of sociality that was meant to sustain commitment and provide time for members and visitors to discuss their views. Often, this forum of solidarity also allowed folks to share their personal and professional trials and tribulations.

For an analysis of some articles in The Clash, see Chapter 4.
**Being “International”**

I found it interesting that Stella did not remember my nationality. It reminded me of her earlier address—“international”—as if that properly covered and named (and strictly speaking, it did) everything outside the United States. When she told me about the coming global war, it was notable how she paused and then included India along with “Japan, China, Russia” in the list of nations that are competing with the United States. It might have been a nod to the fact that India is a large country, but mainly seemed to be included because she was talking to me and I come from there. Japan, China, and Russia were easier to integrate into the idea of international superpowers, given their historic significance as aggressor (Japan), and ideological opponent (Russia or USSR, and China) to the United States. I got the impression that India’s contemporary relevance was less of a concern for Stella than its expedient inclusion in the list of possible opponents in a conversation with me, a fact that she soon forgot, returning me to the category of someone “international,” that is to say, not from the United States. International was inclusive without being specific, and avoided the potentially pejorative “foreign,” or “immigrant.” It was also not the more specific “Indian.” It served to place me (and others from outside the United States) in a larger world, without concretizing or specifying this world. It was a way of naming externality without developing it any further, a curious aporia for a collective with an “internationalist” vision. It operated in the binary of ‘American-not American,’ with the former understood implicitly and the latter a rather generic placeholder only in existence because everyone was not ‘American.’

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141 Separately, the reason that “American” collapses a welter of nationalities and histories within itself while referring only to the United States, is why I have carefully avoided using it myself throughout this
As I began to attend the informal gatherings at Stella’s home, articles in The Clash occasionally mentioned India. I would be called upon to provide information and inputs. Usually, I made a couple of points and tried to integrate them into a class-based reading of the situation, hoping to incite reactions and comments related to the self-avowed internationalist orientation and outlook. I was largely disappointed. When I tried another tack, making observations that would delve into greater detail to explain the historical context of the issue being discussed (farmer suicides in India, for instance) the group members would nod and move on. I was left with the feeling that it was more important that I spoke, rather than the substance of what I said. In these moments, my primary signification seemed to lie in the fact that I was “international,” which served as proof (however tenuous) that the collective Stella and other first generation members had dedicated their life to since their youth was on the right path. My presence, and that of others who were similarly ‘international’ and joined us occasionally, confirmed the COS’s progress towards its ultimate objective. Nonetheless, I enjoyed our conversations, and was intrigued by this quaint language of a grand vision and primary contradictions between two ideologies from the Cold War era. And yet, as I began to learn more about the COS’s Marxism-influenced viewpoint on the world situation, it often struck me that the language of discussion and analysis, which included terms such as “bosses,” “fascists,” “superpowers,” “inter-imperialist rivalry,” and so on could be brought up to date to better reflect the current reality. I also felt that such refreshing and renewal would both re-energize the analysis, and also resonate more with non-members whom the COS dissertation. This is a strangely unacknowledged essentialization in Orientalism (Said 1978), given the anti-essentialist impulse of that work (Assaf Harel, Seminar discussion, February 2008).
wanted to attract to itself. These included co-workers and friends of individual members, as well as intimate partners; Stella’s husband Doug was one such person.

Doug: The Apostate Internationalist, the Disaffected Jew

Understanding dialectics requires practice, class struggle, and a simultaneous battle against all of the system’s rotten “isms.” Chief among these is individualism … rulers promote it from the time children are in the womb … we need to destroy and replace individualism with a completely different world outlook … We live in a culture infested with reformism, subjectivity, and individualism … Only deep personal friendships developed over a long time and tested in all kinds of struggle, both among friends and against the class enemy, can get the job done. This is a demanding, labor-intensive process. [COS Report]

Individuality is a four-letter word for Stella. [Doug]

Doug does not want to die where he was born. He was born in RapCity and raised in Roseberry, an affluent town further “up the hill” from RapCity and Sleepytown, the gently inclining terrain where these places were settled. He is nearly sixty, handsome with what we called in urban India a French beard or “goatee,” and thick hair around his head framing a balding pate. About 5’9”, he maintains his health and physique with regular bike rides in the trails around New Jersey. He loves his iPhone, bar the “o” key that keeps getting mixed up with the “i,” constantly typing “nit” when he means “not.” Laid off from a reputed magazine in the wake of the Internet revolution in news media at the turn of the century, Doug is now a freelance photographer and artist.

“Jewingston, we are in Jewingston,” Doug groaned, and the wince never left his face for too long during the rest of the car ride to Roseberry. I laughed and he said, “yeah, everyone here is white-middle-class-Jewish. [Most] men work downtown, or own factories.” Pointing out a block with shopping outlets, he said this was just a wooded area when he was growing up. Driving past another, he told me it used to be two or three
small stores until they tore the whole place down and built a set of shops. We reached the
diner we were visiting for breakfast, and Doug was making expressions and words of
disdain, a general tone that culminated with him pointing out in disgust that everyone
here is old and had been coming to the diner for years.

The Diner had seven booths on one side of the entrance and tables on the left side,
and a bar with low barstools in front of us. I was feeling rushed again as the waiter
returned a moment after handing us our menus, looming over us with pen poised over
paper. I often encountered this in U.S. service environments, and complained to Doug
who placated me. I ordered a “fully cooked omelet of 2 eggs,” which the waiter repeated
as “over hard.” Doug had one with feta cheese.¹⁴²

He had come back to the place of his childhood and early youth after a long time,
and old feelings were triggered, a kind of general synesthetic irritation at being in
“Jewingston.” Of course, while he steadfastly avoided coming back and was here simply
because he wanted to show me the town of his childhood, Doug had eventually not gotten
very far from Roseberry. After a memorable period in New York City, he lived in
Sleepytown now. For the rest of the meal, we spoke about Doug’s frustrations over
growing up in an insular Jewish community. Agitated as he remembered, Doug told me

¹⁴² A note about eggs:
I learned that what Indians refer to as scrambled eggs, “bhurji,” is not the same thing in the United States. 
_Bhurji_ is prepared in India by mixing onions, cilantro, green chilli and salt with the egg yolk, and shredding
(“scrambling”) the mix once it has hardened slightly within the pan, the outcome being small pieces of egg
with all these ingredients mixed in that can be had with bread or _chapatis_. Scrambled eggs in the United
States meant that they beat the eggs (“scramble” the yolk and egg white) and then make the omelet, not a
_bhurji_. So what I had ordered, thinking it would be an omelet, is actually a version of fried eggs, but with
the yolk fully cooked. It took me four years to find out that the runny gooeyness of the omelet could have
been fixed if I simply ask for “fully cooked scrambled eggs” or “scrambled eggs over hard.” They make no
_bhurji_ in the United States.
that whenever he dated a girl, his parents, “first thing they asked was if she is Jewish. What about my happiness?!”

After finishing breakfast, we got back in the car and pulled out of our parking slot, but had to reverse and wait because three cars were doing their own maneuvers to drive out. As we went around the diner and were about to exit, another car pulled into the lane, agitating a young man wearing a black jacket and sunglasses and driving an expensive two-door sedan. I could see him pointing and ranting, his mood probably not helped by the fact that the car essentially made a slow U-turn, pulling into the lane and then pulling back out, giving him no opportunity to move. Doug was not pleased either. “This is the thing, none of them know how to drive, they are oblivious, and (pointing to the rearview mirror in his own car, to the spot right below the mirror) they all have this fucking handicapped sign, when the only handicap is their brain…they should all be shot.”

We headed to Doug’s old neighborhood as he had promised. We passed by his old house, his elementary school and some shops, a sports field, the community center and pool, and to another house he grew up in before driving over to a natural reserve nearby. We came to a street in a residential neighborhood and Doug intoned, “65.” From I to V grade he lived in house number 65. Doug pointed to the windows on the right, second floor, where his room used to be. They did not live there for long because Doug’s mother intensely disliked the house.

I will show you a picture, me in front of the tree with my baseball bat.” We drove forward a few feet and he told me he had another picture, of “my sister and I in the driveway with our bicycles.”
To the left, he pointed to an open area where he used to play stickball.

And beyond that dead end, there were just woods (now there were houses). We used to go there. I hid there when I wanted to avoid going to my cousin’s bar mitzvah. I did not want to go, I told my parents again and again. They wouldn’t listen. That was unfortunately also where, I’m sorry to say, but I and some friends beat a turtle to death with stones.

On to Doug’s Elementary School. Doug used to ride his bike to school.

It was a real privilege. You have to take the bike test, [and he made a gesture with his arm out and elbow bent, showing a riding signal] riding, and maintenance. If you passed, then you got a sticker. It was great… I had a good time here, I was popular, had friends.

[Doug remembered this teacher, Mr. Holt from South Carolina, who loaned him a ’78 vinyl record.] ‘Alright Louie drop the gun, Louie you ain’t fooling no one,’ sang Doug. One day, he was standing with the record next to a fellow student called David. ‘Man I hated his guts… he was talking and talking. I wanted him to just shut up.’ [Doug became so enraged that he smashed the record over David’s head.] ‘The record was in pieces, and people knew [that the record was borrowed from the teacher]; everyone went ‘ooooo,’ and I won Citizen of the month award that same month! I ‘fessed up [confessed], and was very mature and adult about it.’

Doug laughed at his escapade in face of authority. They were so impressed with how Doug admitted his mistake; little did they consider why he had irrationally lost his temper in the first place. He had gotten away with it.

As we drove, fallen branches and trees were still being cleared up from a recent snowstorm. “Natural disaster strikes Roseberry, people unable to cope,” Doug intoned like a newspaper headline, making a caricature of how such an event and his town might be portrayed in the news. A storm would be a “natural disaster,” making it sound exaggerated and magnified and people from Roseberry would be unable to cope with it, struggling to survive as this Armageddon of falling trees struck their community.

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143 “[A]n informal game resembling baseball, played with a stick and a (usually rubber) ball” (New Oxford American Dictionary).
“Instead of helping their neighbor, they call PSE&G. Complaining, you know, we are the chosen people, anything is not [in order],” he clicked his fingers, “we will complain and get it fixed.” As we drove on, Doug looked around, and just said, “Jesus,” exasperated apropos nothing in particular; and a few moments later, “weird.” Back in his old haunts and with the rush of memories that tied him to this place, Doug had become intensely irritated and uncomfortable!

We passed by a medium sized convenience store, and Doug told me it used to be a pharmacy. “I was caught there once, trying to steal a notebook… the guy told me, ‘I’m going to call your father.’ I said, ‘I have no father!’ [Doug shouted to me with indignation] ‘Maybe that’s why you steal,’” said the shopkeeper who eventually let him go with a warning not to return.

Next, we drove to a baseball field for children. It had a scoreboard, some signs establishing rules of use, a poster for the upcoming season, and the logo of a team called “Lightning.” It was the first one of its kind that I had seen. Our school in India had one all purpose pitch, with a space demarcated on the side for volleyball, and a mud court for basketball.

There were two fields in front of us, one for the “Little League” and one for the older kids. Looking over to his right after we drove a few more feet into the drive separating the two, Doug said, “then I tried for the Major League [the next level baseball team in school]. When I failed, I decided [and now he looked at me], if they don’t want

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144 PSE&G: Public Service Electric & Gas, the major public utility in New Jersey for commercial and residential electricity and gas supply.
me, no one can have me. I hung up my spikes.” Doug was 10 years old when he retired from baseball. Years later, he would retire again, against his will, from full-time work.144

Off to the side of the field was a mound called “the sandpit.” Doug and his classmates used to dig holes, make tunnels, and go through them. But then one day, a kid went into one of the tunnels, passed out and died. Doug looked at me and laughed nervously, and I laughed in contagion, a little horrified by a story from the past of this place.

We turned around, passing the soccer pitch behind the baseball field. Doug strained a, his back giving him trouble again. “I don’t turn as well as I did.” As we drove past the community center Doug pointed out the swimming pool, “this is where we used to spend our summer days, at the pool.”

We reached the street where Doug moved once his mother had decided she hated “65.” The house they moved into on this street was number 115. What Doug remembered was a girl who lived across the street. She was 5 years older than him, and friends with his sister. Doug had his room on the second floor. “She was hot. I used to watch her from my window… she would let down the blinds, let me look.”

We drove through some more of the town’s commercial area and Doug laughed, a little disgusted. “This whole environment is so sterile and vacuous. There’s no there, there. This could be anywhere, these little shops… and then you have the big mall.”

The leisurely day continued. Driving to the natural reserve “cleared” out from the surrounding wild area at the turn of the 19th century, Doug described how Roseberry was
created by a lot of post-war Jewish families moving “west from RapCity,” a large city close to this town. That is how it became a “bedroom community,” one where many professionals working in New York City lived. They would commute every morning and return each evening or night, hence the term “bedroom community.” RapCity was very prosperous at one point.

Lot of factories, manufacturing, hats, haberdashery. Most “Jersey Jews,” second and third generation, had some connection to RapCity. It [RapCity] really went into decline once they built the I-280; it was built to facilitate the white flight, so people could get to Kearny [and on to New York City] quicker. Even now, there are some “good parts” [Doug supplied the air quotes for this, referring to some white families that still live there]. Mostly Italian, there are also certain parts that were always Portuguese. The Ironbound [the middle class Latin Quarter of RapCity] gets its name from actually being ‘ironbound,’ framed by bridges and pathways built with steel.

The reserve was a lookout for Washington’s troops during the Revolutionary War.

We watched the view to New York (“you can see Manhattan from here”), and walked around in the woods before Doug suggested we go and watch dogs in the recreational area. As we got closer, a man with a dog, about 60, wearing glasses and an overcoat passed by. Something I noticed again, “the U.S. smile” that is a greeting for all strangers, was already on his face as he looked at Doug. It stayed, and a moment later he recognized that he was smiling at someone he knew, and not a stranger. “Hey Doug, how are you.”

We walked over to the recreation area where some cute mid-sized dogs were playing, and Doug came alive. Perhaps bored with having only cats at his house, he enjoyed standing there, saying hello to the dogs in a deep voice, and construing imaginary conversations between them. “Hi, let’s play, we will have tug of war over this

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146 It was a very culturally specific, U.S. moment in my experience, a man smiling at someone he does not delineate or actually look at, at all. And then, when he distinguished the features and saw the person become identifiable, there was nothing left to display the smile, but discourse.
stick,” “hi, I’m really happy to be a dog today; yeah, so am I,” and when I asked about
the few props they had for dogs to run through or over, he imitated a dog in response to
me: “[indistinct] that man, I’d rather sniff some ass.” I had never seen him so happy; for
the next twenty minutes he was gleaming, watching and talking to the dogs.

**Living the Life**

We walked back and stood outside the car, soaking up the sun. Doug had just read
a book called “Breaking Open the Head.” It is about a man who went looking for the
perfect hallucinogen, and found it in a spot on the border of Peru. Now it had become a
tourist spot, and you could pay for a “sheyman, shaman,” to accompany you as you
consumed the drug. Then he told me about how “they” have found this natural cure for
heroin addiction, but vested interests are not letting it come out, because it would hurt the
pharmaceutical industry.

Talk drifted to alcohol and drugs, and Doug asked me if I had ever done cocaine. I
told him “somehow that stuff [drugs such as cocaine] passed me by.” Nonetheless, he
warmed to the theme. When he was working at a leading magazine, on Friday everyone
worked all night, finalizing the weekly edition. Doug had a dealer who he would buy an
eighth\textsuperscript{147} from every Thursday. Everyone would be coming in and going out of his office,
doing a line.

Reese Spears, and I used to have my own office back then, she was hot…
There was this woman in office, an African lady, she was from, er, Ghana,
and her boyfriend used to bring this pink, fragrant cocaine. It was beautiful
man. My dealer [and here his eyes lit up again], he had this sparkling
cocaine. [He told me that good cocaine hits you instantly, and you can tell

\textsuperscript{147} An “eighth,” as one of my interlocutors in RapCity clarified, is 1/8th of an ounce. It is used as a standard
measure for marijuana as well.
how good it is immediately. Other times, however, you get cocaine that is] laced [adulterated] with baby laxative, and you shit all day.

So Doug would consume cocaine at work from Friday night to Sunday. He was excited by his memories, looking back fondly at the days of a pleasure-filled life of work and play. After finishing his recollections and telling me that cocaine is great, he raised his head, and with a look of gravity—creased eyebrow, stiller face—said, “In fact I had a cocaine problem for 20 years.” Doug showed no signs of something like this today.

Once he was laid off Doug faced financial difficulties, lost insurance, and had $100,000 in credit card debt. He decided to declare for bankruptcy. During his marriage with Stella, Doug struggled to find steady employment. He had a few sporadic jobs photographing events, and would look for additional work in the summer. Stella gave him a monthly allowance.

In many ways, Doug was truly a hedonistic individualist, seeking to seize life in the moment; quite the opposite of the radical seeking to “smash racism, smash capitalism.” An ongoing tension existed in Stella and Doug’s relationship, given his desire for artistic expression, individuality, pleasure, and the experience of life itself. Stella on the other hand, herself a playwright, sought to use art in a more didactic fashion. For her as for the COS, individualism was one of the diseases of capitalism. Their relationship was a microcosm of the dialectic and contradiction between the COS as a collective and U.S. society at large.

“Wife Support,” and Labor for The Collective

In the Fall of 2011 with Thanksgiving approaching, Doug recounted a complaint of his, that he did not want to spend every Thanksgiving with Stella’s friends but nonetheless ended up doing so at Stella’s insistence. He thought he will have to be a little
more assertive and not give in so easily. I assumed these friends were all COS members, but he conceded that many are members of her theater and playwriting group. Still, for him it was problematic to be submerged in Stella’s social scene during this festive sociality. Things went a little better that Thanksgiving feast, as Stella had a very small gathering; I attended with my wife, and Doug had his son and a friend come over.

Of course, he often felt somewhat obligated to give in. As he often said, he lived on “wife support.” Once laid off, Doug had not been able to find steady employment as a photographer. Apart from the work mentioned above, he had some good connections that provided sporadic opportunities photographing weddings and A-list events, but there was no source of consistent, reliable income. Being dependent on Stella then created an implicit pressure to follow her lead on social occasions such as Thanksgiving. One of these times he felt such an obligation, but eventually was quite agitated about it, was when Stella pressured him to attend the memorial for one of the founding members of the COS, who was the leader and main ideologue of the COS till the early nineties.

In fact, Doug had joined the COS for a brief time. Then, three months into attending his study group (the group organized classes on dialectical materialism), he stopped going and slowly fell out of the membership. “Why are they so earnest,” he said in exasperation when describing the study group environment. Doug had also worked with Stella in New Orleans during one summer, helping families in clearing and rebuilding their homes after Hurricane Katrina.

Doug sent me a sequence of text messages on the Saturday before the memorial. He had agreed to attend even though he might have preferred avoiding the occasion.
Yo Yaar\textsuperscript{148}
I hope you’re well.
I’ve decided to go to the memorial. I’m supposed to pick you up around 12:30.
We’ll head home together after…
Maybe have a beer for the road.
Talk tomorrow.
Ciao

On the morning of the memorial, Stella texted me: “Doug will get you. A little earlier.”

The day before the event, Stella had said to me she did not want Doug to do political work, that it was often causing tensions between them. In her hesitation, she had left it too late to ask him to pick up Mr. Quincy, a COS member, from the airport. As we chatted, she texted back and forth with Quincy and Doug, the former to take the cab to their house and the latter to go pick him up from there. After a round of texting, Doug called to remonstrate, and Stella said that in the future she will ask him for such favors well in time.

Once in the car with Doug, I asked why he had decided to come to the memorial. He exhaled visibly, and said he was going because he was feeling a little guilty. Then he said that being Jewish, he is easily susceptible to guilt. “Oh, right from my upbringing, ‘oh you are killing me’” (and he made a gesture of pain, and grasped his forehead, to indicate the tone of interactions, or people’s dispositions within his family when he was growing up). When I asked if the stereotype was not one of Catholic guilt, he explained that Catholics are known to keep the guilt inside, while for Jewish people it is more external.

Once we reached the venue Doug joined Stella who had driven in her own car with some others and wanted to sit up front. During the memorial I heard her a few times.

\textsuperscript{148}Yaar: The Hindi equivalent of “Buddy” or friend; a friendly form of address.
Stella had a characteristic laugh, or exultation, in public gatherings. It was a short, not shrill but sharp and somewhat contrived sound, impossible to describe in words. It seemed to me that in this crowd as in others, Stella wanted to draw attention to herself. It again indexed her ongoing struggle with her own individuality, something she mentioned when she might succumb to the temptation to buy a nice fashion accessory, take a vacation, and the like.\textsuperscript{149}

Near the end of the event, Doug texted me: “Jesus. Now I know why communism failed.” The memorial had gone on for nearly four hours at this point. After singing songs such as “Bella Ciao” and “Internacionaal” from the revolutionary canon, a lineup of speakers recounted their memories of the deceased Founder and Leader, and his undying dedication to the cause of changing the world. One speaker cut off her speech voluntarily because we had been listening for nearly two hours. Not picking up the hint, the next speaker went on for over forty-five minutes. The crowd tried once to take a pause in his storytelling as an opportunity to clap him off the stage, and another lady tried to catch his eye with a “time out” sign, but they failed. Mercifully, the forty-five-minute speech concluded the memorial, although it was not formally ended with any announcement from the stage. Everyone simply got up and moved towards the snacks area, or gathered in smaller groups.\textsuperscript{150}

This is what annoyed Doug the most. “They just don’t know when to stop. There is no sense of drama, of a proper conclusion. There is no organization. I think they should have stopped right after Quincy’s speech.” Quincy was a group member and a priest by

\begin{footnotes}
\item[149] See more on this struggle with individuality and consumerist desires in Chapter 4.
\item[150] For more on the memorial, the leader and various speakers, see Chapter 4.
\end{footnotes}
occupation, and had indeed thrown in a couple of rousing lines into his speech, such as “let dialectical materialism bless the Holy Spirit.” It might have been an appropriate conclusion, but as it turned out we were only about two thirds of the way through.

Still irritated after we had found a small bar with a cavernous pathway to a backyard, Doug spoke of “another thing Stella does.” At the memorial they had met another couple, both members of the COS. “Without making any conversation,” they asked Stella if they could borrow her car the next day because they wanted to drive to the New Jersey shore and view a property. Stella immediately said yes, and Doug was frustrated; it was obvious she meant to offer them Doug’s car. He would have preferred to be consulted before she said yes.

This was for Doug a wider issue with members of the COS. They didn’t seem to respond to what he considered conventional social cues, like making some conversation before asking for someone’s car (and asking for it a few days prior rather than the just the day before needing it), picking up the message that the service has gone on too long and they need to pause, and so on. After a couple of beers and some snacks to relieve our growling stomachs of the pitiful offerings of chips at the memorial, this apostate from internationalism and me had satisfied our need to speak about sitting there and listening for so long, and headed back home to RapCity-Sleeptown.

Stella tried to accommodate Doug’s concerns to some extent. He insisted that sometimes he be allowed to take a trip, be it a vacation to Turkey or a weekend camping by himself, to nourish himself and his artistic work. They both referred to it as his desire to “fly solo.” While she sporadically acquiesced, it was never easy for Stella to let him go this way. Stella told me that this stemmed from having “issues with abandonment,
something in my childhood.” These issues came up again when Doug wanted to make a solo trip to India.

**Stella’s Childhood**

Born in Allensville, Kentucky, Stella had already moved homes four times by the time she was four years old. Stella told me that 1941 was still the era of depression in the United States, and the army was a stable occupation. However, her father had lost one hand in an accident, and was ineligible for army service. Following in the footsteps of Stella’s grandfather, her father collected dues for an insurance company amongst other jobs. In a box of things from her father and grandfather, she had found “little books, these little books, they’re so cute!” These books listed farm related activities compiled by her grandfather as part of his work for the insurance company. The oldest one dated to the last decade of the 19th century.

An only child, Stella lost her mother when she was six years old. Her father had to leave her in the care of another family at this time because he found work in another state. She affirms that this did not derail her, as her father always preached the value of avoiding self-pity and not complaining about one’s lot. He married again, and in a reaction of stereotypical oedipality, Stella did not like her stepmother at first: “I wanted my father to marry me!” Eventually Stella concluded her stepmother was “a better person than my real mother.” The absolute, doubt-free conviction of a 6-year-old did not appear to have faded when she spoke to me all these years later. Her stepmother’s children were sitting on the steps in front of the house when she was introduced to them, and her future siblings offered her grapes. She looks back fondly on this moment considering it to be her first experience of socialism. To be offered grapes by those not indebted to her, be cared
for in this way was memorable for Stella, in a childhood that she claims to remember little of. As with many other experiences and memories, this was also integrated to the teleology of her internationalist outlook, a vision that made sense of everything. The experience of the ‘grapes of socialism’ foreshadowed and recalled Stella’s commitment to an object—communism—that offered promise of similar care. It made the cares of daily life, the difficulties of relationships, the evil of capitalism, it made all this recede, filling Stella with a pleasant and wonderful hope, a hope that nurtured her as she nurtured the coming revolution.

Stella said she does not remember much of her early childhood; but then she recounted a few tales.

They tell me, that there was a very big dog in the apartment, and I was never afraid of the dog. I’ve never had a fear of dogs. I actually got mauled [ten years ago] by a couple of Rottweilers who were being walked, in RapCity. These people [the dog owners in RapCity] had children, and I don’t know, these dogs might eventually turn on their kids. My mother once told me don’t go across the street now because its windy and you will get a cinder in your eye, and sure enough, I got a cinder in my eye [this was the era of coal heating]… I used to go to the beach with my mother, and just the thought of my little pale and shovel used to fill me with, oh! Another instance I remember is seeing my parents standing in the shower, naked, and they looked at me and said I was going to have small feet. I felt so bad. I wanted big feet. Now, I love my small feet! [The] only really sad thing was that I had a dachshund, and her name was Zippy, but she was not so zippy 151... one day I came back and they had put her to sleep.

I was kind of spoiled, but I didn’t have things, never. 152 Things that showed how spoiled I was: some of the neighbors would complain that I

151 “Zippy”: colloquial for hyperactive, agile, fast moving. A zippy dog is a bundle of energy. Also “bright, fresh, or lively,” “fast or speedy” (New Oxford American English Dictionary).
152 Having things would be a form of bourgeois existence. Her daughter Helen clarified this relationship to things at Stella’s birthday. In an odd dedication, she said that when they were kids they looked at other kids and wondered, “why can’t we have those things.” Immediately after this pining that remained from her childhood, her daughter reaffirmed her mother’s work ethic, her work as a nurse that was a model for her children, “so there will always be that.” It seemed she affirmed Stella, and also the COS (of which Helen was also a member), but not without a lingering ambivalence.
never got hit; things that I did, that I probably should’ve gotten hit for, one of them was these comic books. At the end of the book there were these four pages, kind of a mystery story, and there was the story of ‘The Blot.’ We [she and another girl] wrote threatening letters to everyone on the street and told them, ‘If you don’t give us a thousand dollars you will die; signed, The Blot.’ My [step]mother made me go to every house and apologize.

Once my father said we will go for a movie. I got so excited that I vomited. So we ended up not going.

These synchronic shifts were arresting. From a large dog (whose name was missing in her memory), to dogs that mauled Stella nearly fifty years later and (in her ennunciation) turned on the children of the family, and then back to a dog (Zippy) who was silently removed while she was away. The simultaneity of these recollections about absence, mutilation of children, and death was striking. To clarify the temporal order, I had to ask her when she got mauled and also who “these people” referred to. Stella had seamlessly gone from the dog in her apartment in St. Louis, to being mauled by dogs that might also attack children of their own family. Left alone by her mother and then by her father, Stella wonders if these dogs who mauled her might not attack the children of their owners if they were left unattended. Of course, they would only be able to do this if they were left unwatched by their owners, their human parents. Yet, when she was a child, she was never scared of dogs, and remembers a dog that was old and not so “zippy.” Dogs are otherwise absent in Stella’s life; she prefers cats, and had five at one point.

It seemed the figure of the “dog” stood in for, or was identified with, an absent mother, whose early death she passed over in our conversations. The only time mention of her mother came up more frequently was during her estrangement with Doug, when she readily spoke repeatedly about what she called her “abandonment issues.” Doug called them the same: her issues with abandonment. There was this ambiguity running through her lack of fear of dogs, yet the imagining that they might turn against sons and
daughters. It is true that her mother “left her,” as it were, through death. A young Stella perhaps experienced this loss of a loved object as an abandonment, an act of aggression, an aggression that is condensed in the dogs’ imagined aggression. This abandonment through absence evoked a malicious aggression, one that might destroy the young ones in its own family, like little Stella, or the children of those who owned the Rottweilers in RapCity.

Stella had odd reactions around children, or talk of children. It seemed she was not fully present in the context of such conversations, exiled into her own recollections and associations. Talk of her son—always in passing, always in a throwaway comment—often bubbled near the surface but was rarely expressed. I encountered moments of Stella’s painful relationship to motherhood. Canela, a regular member of the reading group, had been missing meetings. His fiancée was pregnant. She was going through a difficult first trimester, often sick and unable to hold down her food. For Stella, this was decidedly an inconvenience as far as its effect on Canela’s attendance at group meetings was concerned. Canela had mentioned that Stella was pressuring him too much. It was a few days before May Day, the annual spectacle COS conducted on the east coast, intermittently in Chicago, and also in California. Canela was agitated that Stella was being completely insensitive to the fact that he had to take care of his fiancée and manage things at work, and only cared about his attendance at group meetings.

Canela was clear that his politics were not changing and neither had his commitment to the group lessened. At first it seemed that this was exactly what caused Stella concern. With no revolution imminent, commitment effectively meant attending the group meetings, and joining public events deemed worthy of joining by the group
whenever they came up during the course of the year. However, something else struck me when Stella decided to talk to me about the situation. After trying Canela’s phone numbers (office and personal) and finding that he was simply not answering calls for a few days, Stella got in touch with me and told me that she was concerned about him.

He’s been canceling last minute, does not come to the meetings and I want to make sure he is ok. Are you in touch with him? It is very annoying because there are times when he texts me ten minutes before the meeting is about to begin, and he has sometimes done this when he was supposed to bring something [food], and then I have to prepare something. This girl he is with, who is carrying his baby, he says she has been sick. But he also told me that things should get better after three months. It’s been longer than that! Between you and me, Canela is a little too giving. We should talk to him.

I was almost moved to defend Canela, but did not. At first, I was surprised that Stella could not see how caring for his fiancée and for his unborn baby and managing at his workplace, temporarily at the expense of coming to the meetings if need be, would be the correct priorities in Canela’s life at that time. After all, he might raise an internationalist baby, another potential member of the COS (although his teenage son from a previous relationship had not joined). But I knew well not to argue with her, knowing that the reading group meeting was very important for her. From another perspective, it was not so surprising; it was easy to see how her absolute commitment to the COS could cloud her judgment about a comrade and his struggles; at the time, I was surprised and became annoyed, although I did not convey the contents of my conversation with Stella to Canela. Other memories of the time I had spent with Stella began drawing my attention. I had been with her in many settings: informal meetings, grocery shopping trips, visits to New York City to watch a play or get together with other members of the COS, dinners and lunches at my house and hers, evenings for coffee or wine and snacks, services at a liberal and non-sectarian church, a few public protests. I
wondered if she bore some resentment towards a mother-to-be, one who she had not even seen yet, and only referred to as “the girl who is carrying his baby.”

We were at Ryan and Brooke’s place for a “Glühwein” party near Christmas. They were friends of Doug, especially Brooke, and I had been invited. Amongst the guests was a family that I had not met before. One of the daughters in this family, a teenager, had recently had a child. The baby was adorably wrapped from neck to toe in a piece of cloth. At one point, I took her in my lap and fed her from the bottle. Sometime during the party, the baby began crying a little, and when Stella pointed this out to the baby’s mother, she merely said “oh,” without any change in her deadpan expression. The mother made no move toward the child. Instead, the baby’s grandmother came and picked up the baby from the couch and walked her about the room. The teenage mother was obviously badly affected by the experience of childbirth. She seemed withdrawn, dissociated from her baby. The baby’s presence seemed to bother Stella, who progressively became more aggravated. She nearly got into an argument with me because I did not immediately go to the living room as she had instructed after we took a drink in the kitchen. Doug pulled me away from her as soon as he noticed that she had stopped looking at me, and her face was turning red as she began to say, “No, we told you to…”

Sure enough, an hour or so later, with a variety of conversations going on in different parts of the room, Stella began to get restless. She picked up the baby and carried it on her forearms. Stella purposefully marched—tense, rigid, upright, angry—towards the teenage mother and the group she was surrounded by. Earnest and self-righteous, she began to address the group about what the baby needed, but failed to verbalize clearly what she wanted to say. After a few passionate words, she became even
more tense, until she finally handed over the baby to her mother and mumbled, “Maybe you should feed her now.”

Perhaps Stella was morally outraged at this “neglect,” as it were, this lack of attachment she perceived in the young teenage mother who was faced with her child. Stella was trying to set something right, but floundered when the time came to articulate what it was that was wrong and what needed to be done to make it right. Watching the teenage mother’s dissociation from the baby seemed to remind Stella of other children: a child whose vulnerability was revealed in his death, and a child that was abandoned by her mother at the tender age of six. This child was also being neglected by his mother, and this inflamed Stella. However, while she was impelled to act, she eventually could not speak.

Her own nest had been emptied long ago.

**Motherhood and Stella**

The first time Stella mentioned her deceased son to me she said, “and when my son got in trouble, I was like, ‘good,’ because of the all the crummy things he did.” Another time, “the thing we didn’t realize is that it is important for kids to explore when they are young, but drugs are something we should keep them [away] from.”

Marriages within the COS were not uncommon. Stella was married to Roger, a scholar and like Stella, a long-time member of the COS. Roger recently published a book arguing that most of the claims made regarding Stalin’s regime after his death are

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153 Crummy: dirty, unpleasant, or of poor quality; unwell, ill (New Oxford American Dictionary).
falsifiable. Roger and Stella adopted two boys and had a daughter, Helen, together. The two boys did not turn out so well. One passed away at the age of 30 due to diabetes related complications. The other is 35 years old, has a problem with alcohol, is unemployed and reliant on Roger for his monthly expenses and child support payments.

She simply said Roger’s name twice in a lingering non-sentence as she made the halting declaration that her son’s problem was indeed drugs. While there was a difference of opinion between them according to Stella, in these halting droppings of her husband’s name because something kept her from criticizing him explicitly too often, Roger prevailed. Stella lived with Roger as long as she could, leaving him after nearly two decades together.

That was “years of marriage, watching my sons go downhill.” Stella blamed RapCity, the neighborhood they were living in, and, with some hesitation, Roger. While RapCity offered an urban climate where drugs were readily available, her husband exacerbated it, with his lack of attention to the problem and a flippant refrain that the kids were “just experimenting.” For Stella, this made it inevitable that they should fall victim to the vices on offer in RapCity.

RapCity was the place with the vicious dogs (she did not fear them, but nonetheless worried that these dogs would attack children of their own family, the offspring), the place with the vicious drugs (and the people associated with them) that destroyed her son. However, the COS’s analysis of racism was integral to its

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154 This is in line with the “anti-revisionist revisionism” of the COS. Just as Nikita Khruschev publicly revisited Stalin’s regime after his death at the III International Congress of the Soviet Party, so Roger produced a tome arguing most of the accusations about violence and totalitarian oppression during Stalin’s regime can potentially be thrown in doubt. For more on the COS’s relationship to Marxist ideology and historical figures in the socialist tradition, see Chapter 4.
understanding of the superexploitation of all workers. RapCity was the place where the urban black community existed in difficulty, and the COS had attempted (and continued to work on) creating an “intentional community” (as Stella’s daughter Helen termed her own and a few other COS members’ decisions to live there). Stella disavowed her negative associations with RapCity. Yet, as we have seen in Chapter 1, having moved out of RapCity after living there for many years, she did not cross the street into RapCity to actualize her ideals, to realize the intentional community. RapCity? “Oh, that’s nothing,” she said as she took me for a walk around her neighborhood.

A few significant moments in Stella’s life seemed to have involved resigning or assigning responsibility to others; husbands, leaders, places such as RapCity. From snatches and references here and there by Stella, Doug, her son-in-law, and others in the group, I had learned that the adoptions were pursued at Roger’s behest, as was much else during their life together. Stella went along. Stella had a history of going along. When she was about 22 years old, before her conversion to Internationalism, she went along with someone to Europe. “He said he was going, it sounded like a good idea, and I went along.” Having joined the COS, she changed her original plan of studying to be a doctor, and went along with the COS leaders’ suggestion to take up a different profession. They told her she wanted to be a doctor because she wanted personal recognition, which was individualistic and against the outlook of the COS. She signed Doug, her third husband, onto her mortgage and created other financial sharing situations such as a joint bank account, and signing Doug and his son from a previous marriage into her insurance and her will. Again, he suggested it, and she went along. It was easy to see how a
commitment to something larger than herself, to the vision of a utopia and the idealization of the COS as the agent of that utopia compelled Stella. Without enough support to raise children, and with a partner that seemed concerned with rewriting the history of a time and place—the Stalinist regime in USSR—that he had not lived through, Stella suffered the ultimate loss. The cruelty of this optimistic vision and its ramifications in her life went further, however; unable to mourn completely or share the responsibility of what happened, Stella turned on herself.

**I wasn’t much of a mother, hmmm**
Stella had this epiphany one day in January 2012, in the midst of her conflict with Doug over his desire to take a trip to India (see below). Doug recounted the episode to me in a cluster of frustrations about things Stella said and did that perplexed him and had brought the relation to this stage. He spoke of lack, repeatedly wondering what was lacking in Stella’s life. “Lacking, until she had a revelation. she was at a cemetery [sometime in the 1960s] and that was the moment [when she became an Internationalist].” Stella was in Europe at that time. Sometime during her stay in Europe when she was very young, Stella had a breakdown, and her family went to care for her. It was during this period of crisis when, walking in a cemetery, she had a moment of revelation and became dedicated to internationalism as the vision of the future and of humanity. Doug was not sure if that lack was now made whole, and although Stella certainly pursued her commitments wholeheartedly, Doug continued to wonder.

Doug and Stella were married when her son passed away. He told me that when Stella left Roger, her daughter Helen became the de-facto mother for her two siblings, even though she was roughly the same age as them. Roger could not be bothered with the
day to day care of the kids, he was too busy teaching and working on new publications in revisionist history, trying to recover the truth about Stalin from the rubble of the USSR and widespread criticism in scholarly circles of his regime and its monstrous, bureaucratic violence.

Stella never spoke her son’s name out loud to me. I heard it from others: Doug, Helen’s husband (Helen and her husband had moved into the house vacated after Stella’s son’s death), Constantine (a man who worked in the street economy in RapCity and was her son’s friend). Same with the other son: Stella never enunciated their names. Their names do not appear in this story, just like the dogs whose names are not spoken.

Stella was dismissive of any psychological reasoning in general. Nonetheless, she had experience of being in therapy herself, to deal with “my anger at my ex-husband for enabling my son to death. She [the therapist] helped me to understand there was really nothing I could do about it.” After the untimely death of her son she started having strange and painful twinges in her forearms, late at night, coinciding with the times her son woke up when he was a child. Finding nothing wrong physically, she spoke to a therapist who interpreted that she was recalling the loss of her son, whom she would cradle in her forearms when he woke up crying. Where her son used to rest his head, now there were “twinges.” It was these same forearms on which she carried the baby to her family at Ryan and Brooke’s party. In 2013, she told me the pain came back each time around the anniversary of his death.

Stella and Roger’s son was discovered a few days after his death. Stella was distraught. Doug had never seen her cry like this before or after that day. Once she stopped sobbing, Stella began raging about “the system, the evils of capitalism” to family
members that had gathered, until her surviving son, exasperated by it all, said, “Mom? Shut up!” She left the house. Our mutual friend Ena told me that she was at the gym on the morning of her son’s funeral. Stella marked her son’s passing with her absence, a lost mother who had lost her mother and now lost her son. The lost revolution of 1917, one the COS did not live through but was inspired by, and the lost possibility of the 1960s, when total social change seemed possible and perhaps even imminent, equated, replicated, and displaced these losses for Stella. She continued to throw herself wholeheartedly into the work of the COS. However, the threat of being left alone, abandoned, reared its head again. Events took a strange and painful turn when Doug decided it was time for him to “fly solo” again, time for another trip by himself. Participant observation changed irrevocably when I became implicated in this abandonment: Doug wanted to go to India.

“Without Me?!”: The Trip to India

Doug asked Stella if he could go to India at the end of service one winter Sunday in 2011 at the Unitarian church. “Without me?!” reacted Stella, with a light shriek and exclamation as her hand reached for her mouth. “There is going to be some friction on this,” Doug told me as he dropped me back home.

As mentioned above, Stella had said a few times that she has fears of abandonment stemming from childhood, and Doug leaving for India was as clear a case of abandonment as one could imagine. He was going away, from her. She was not going anywhere. She was to be left behind. He would come back, but right now he was only asking about going. As always when he took “solo” trips (twice so far in the eight years
they were married), and when he asked for a day exploring by himself on their trips
together, Stella clung to the withdrawing Doug.

I was leaving in the middle of January 2012 to renew my visa. It festered between
them for a while, with fights lasting late into the night. Nonetheless, Doug eventually
made the trip to India. When we met in India Doug told me they had long arguments and
Stella had accused him of hatching a plan to go, behind her back, with my involvement.

Between his trip to India and the struggle over her inviting DeJuan (a 20-year-old
she was trying to recruit into the COS) to temporarily live in the basement without
consulting Doug, their relationship broke down. After a long fight, over Doug’s financial
dependence on Stella (which he resents her for), his need to “fly solo” (which she can not
countenance), Stella putting the COS over everything else (she found it odd that Doug
should have a problem with this; “I have been with the COS for over forty years!”), she
asked him to leave. When he said he would leave in the morning, she turned over the
coffee table. In Doug’s version of the story, Stella sat in bed, rocking back and forth and
chanting, “you lied, you lied [about the trip to India].” She was convinced of the truth of
her assumption, and was not going to brook any disagreement. He left the next day.

I was stunned, on this sunny day in March 2012 exactly a month after “our” return
from India, when Stella called me over and told me that Doug had moved out. The tone
was set once we settled into her living room and she said, “you might have heard that
Doug has moved out,” implying that Doug and I were in regular touch. I had become a
party to this act of betrayal, a co-conspirator in this plan for Doug to fly solo, leaving
Stella behind again. She was quick to interrogate me; after a few platitudes about her
friends and their support, she fixed her eye on me and asked, “so I really wanted to know;
did you and Doug talk about this trip before that day [at Church]?” I told her that I had mentioned in passing to Doug that I have to go to India to have my visa renewed a few months ago. He had brought it up the morning when he picked me up to go church, asking if he could come with me or join me there later. I had told him he can go with me and although I will be only in one or two places in India, if I knew people where he went, I will ask them to help him.

On hearing this, Stella said she felt better about Doug, because if we had been sitting down and planning the trip to India, she “would have felt so betrayed.” She said nothing about me. Then, ostensibly to give me “some background,” Stella described how, just a month after he had first met her, Doug had asked her for $5,000. She said that should have been a red flag for her, but at the time she simply asked what he needed it for, although it was unclear whether she really asked or not, or what his answer was. He eventually borrowed $20,000 from his mother, and paid Stella back. Comments about his financial dependence led Stella to talk about “dialectical materialism… and this is the materialism of our relationship, it's the finances. I began to feel more and more like his wallet.” She drifted, rationalizing her situation and looking for positives: “Writing, working, having friends; and Internationalism, which I won’t see…”

I felt that Stella was transferring her emotional responses towards Doug and her expectations of the structure of their relationship onto our dialogue, rather onto her interrogation of me (and Doug). My affirmation of my honesty became a source of relief to her about Doug’s honesty but also disrupted her narrative of the ongoing separation. She attempted to replicate and reaffirm (with me) what she knew Doug had done—abandoned her, lied to her, betrayed her, planned his trip to India without her
knowledge. In telling her the truth, I contradicted Doug, who had told her (to spite her?) that we had been planning the trip to India for months. My words broke down the structure she was trying to replicate, and she reverted to disbelieving me (and by extension Doug) about my claim that we had not planned anything behind her back, to restore her relationship (however fractured at this point) with Doug, and reaffirm control over him and her narrative of the situation.

Eventually, she tacitly confessed her jealousy of the friendship between Doug and I, and revealed she was unconvinced we were not conspiring behind her back about the trip to India. She indicated that Doug had become friendlier with me than anyone else in the reading group. Two years ago, when I had started coming to the reading group meetings at her house, this was something she appreciated. Doug told her that since I joined the group, sitting upstairs in his study he heard much more laughter coming from the group sitting downstairs in the living room. Stella made a point of telling me this repeatedly, and even encouraged Doug and me to interact more. Now, however, her comments about my “comradeship” with Doug hung in the air, ambiguously implying a comparison with other group members, but also my relation to Doug and her. I confronted Stella, asking if she meant I had become more of a friend of Doug than hers. After pausing and making her head very still, to keep from nodding in assent, I believe,) she said, “it’s equal, it’s equal, lets say that.”

Hurt by her enduring suspicion, I did not reach out as much as I might have during the rest of that conversation. In retrospect, I was unable to contain her feelings towards me, but at the time I was convinced that Stella was shaken more by having to confront the loss of control she believed she exercised on Doug (“I could not prevent him
from going, I couldn’t”), and indeed on me, as a member of the reading group and a potential international recruit of the COS.

The immersion in this relationship made certain things invisible for me, blinding me to my own reactions and compromising my “objectivity,” “distance,” but crucially, my ability to reflect on myself. I shared an earlier draft of this account with my advisor. She responded with a firm kindness that I was unable to fully perceive and receive at the time, caught up as I was in the emotional flux of having (at least formally) finished fieldwork and reintegrating to university, beginning to write, and think about possibilities of employment in the recessionary climate. But a comment lingered nonetheless and came to mind recurrently. It seemed to my advisor that there were shades of a relationship of mother and son between Stella and me. Surprised and unable to assimilate such an idea at the time, I nodded and looked at my notebook; checking back now a couple of years after this meeting, I can see I wrote nothing about this observation in my notes.

Yet, that comment lingers even today. Was I Stella’s son? If so, which one? The one who left her and this world? Or the one who only sees her ex-husband when he needs money? Or the one who is “international” and will participate in fulfilling the destiny of humankind by joining the COS? Or the one who tried for the longest time to escape his parents, moving to Mumbai from Delhi for education; the one who wondered why, if they bickered so much, his Indian parents did not simply go to court and get a divorce? The one who chafed when Stella seemed to be too controlling and argued with her when he felt that this vision of class conflict and World War III and global utopia was outdated and annoying? What happened to my “ethical” diktats, received in a research design and
methods course, to not be judgmental, to try and “listen” to my interlocutors, to receive their articulations. Why did my methods course teach me nothing about intimacy, getting too close, emotions that rose up out of nowhere and made no sense? What was this data?

More to the point: why did I accept so simply Doug’s desire to “fly solo,” not asking myself why this should not be the one trip where he does this, and instead, given that Stella was so crucial to my work and that we were so close to each other, they should come to my country together? I was certainly enthusiastic about his trip, instantly telling him I will do what I can as soon as he asked, like a good Hindu was expected to? Atithi devobhav, “the guest is god himself,” as we learned and believed. Quite apart from their own decisions, why did I not even suggest this to Doug, or talk about the possibility of coming to India with Stella? Why did this excitement to welcome a guest to India not expand to include Stella?

I can hide behind some vague precept of non-directive research, doing no harm by intervening in dynamics of relationships between people. However, not only do such ideas seem patently absurd given the situation I was in and the model I followed instead, of not keeping my distance and not trying to control the process and trajectory of relations that I built in research; these professional guidelines did not even occur to me at the time. Furthermore, I was already well implicated in Stella’s life, and it was the knowledge produced through this fraught and unexpected relation that forms the substance of this account offered here.

The questions that linger are not those of ethics, of protection (my subjects’ or my own), at least not for me. What lingers is this still troubled relationship to my own feelings, feelings that resist clarity and articulation and continue to haunt me in unknown
ways. Looking back, what was so surprising about Stella’s view that Doug and I colluded over his trip? On that Sunday morning in the church, I had walked away as soon as I saw Stella’s reaction to Doug’s mention of the trip. But on that day or later, I never thought to talk to her about it, never sought to ask her if she was really uncomfortable about just Doug “flying solo,” or did it have something to do with this specific trip which involved India and me. Just like Doug, I was happy to get away, chafing under some feeling of being in too much debt, under too much control, unable to fulfill some unclear expectation of Stella’s. Had this friendship become too much to bear?

Friendship

Our goal is not merely dozens of friendships. Nor do we seek friendships with the goal of simply making life better, or making life under capitalism tolerable. We recognize that the contradiction between reform and revolution enters into personal relations… We struggle for commitment … We build internationalist relations. The struggle over communism is the main aspect of our friendships. Spending time with fellow workers and students, sharing common class concerns in friendship is part of this process. But the key to the process is the inevitable sharp struggle over our internationalist ideas. The unity of our friendship over time will allow us to overcome the reluctance, resistance and objections workers have to joining and building the Party. These relationships multiplied by hundreds, then thousands, then hundreds of thousands, will create the trend of millions towards communism. [COS document; emphasis added]

Over the next year, I had found it harder and harder to be attentive when Stella spoke, finding her utterances generic and disconnected from the context. Objectively, I should have been grateful for everything she had done for me in the past. But that was part of the problem, this “help.” I wondered how much of it came out of a specific human interest in me, how much out of the position document of her radical society, and how much it connected to her perceiving me as a “help-needing immigrant,” and whether she

156 Stella has helped me, and others, so much; looking for an apartment for me while I was searching for a place to live in my fieldsite, offering me a ride to the post office or the grocery store when I asked, and consistently embroiled in the case of one undocumented detainee or another.
only expected me to reciprocate by joining in her political commitments. Sensing a disconnect, and reading the ideas she has followed faithfully for over fifty years, added to the disconcerting feeling that I was an object, grist for the mill of the coming revolution.\textsuperscript{157}

Once I become “help-able,” Stella started making claims and imputing ideas to me that are not really mine. In a moment of candor, I had told her that I was struggling with being alone (my wife was conducting her own research in Germany) and felt depressed over the stress of writing. That moment, my supposed need for help at having shared a phase of vulnerability, now became a frozen reference point for Stella. Months later, she would still talk about it whenever the fancy took her, including once at the group meeting, where to my consternation, she tried “socializing” my emotions, pointing them out to everyone and trying to make some kind of connection between my feelings and the capitalist system where the bosses want all the power.

In summer 2013, a year on from the India trip and months since Doug moved out and they put divorce proceedings in motion, Stella and I met for beer and grill at her house. Stella was planning to meet with Bob, her friend from the theater group who was gay and a World War II veteran. He was invited away to a lake and I got the call instead. First the night before.

“R u in Germany now [visiting my wife, who was doing fieldwork].”
I received another text the next morning.

\textsuperscript{157} Attempts to form meaningful relationships are very much part of the COS’s “line.” The group “advocates “basebuilding,” meaning that members should get stable jobs that keep them in touch with the working class—teaching in public school as opposed to private, for example, or working in a welfare office instead of a day spa—and should enjoy everyday lives while gradually attempting to win their co-workers, friends and family to respect and join the COS.” (emphasis added).
“Have u left for Germany? If you’re in RapCity, wanna come by around 6 for burgers corn and beer? If you can stop for some beer I can pick u up : - )”
“What’s the occasion,” I asked
“You and me. Seldom see. Life is here. Time for beer… I even have cream puffs for dessert.”

As I walked up the three steps and the paved walk leading up to her house door, I noticed the signs of single life. The plants were overgrowing, impinging from the grass on to the brick walk, which also had weeds growing out of the minute interstices that we never see. They remain invisible, but weeds finally announce their presence, even though we still don’t really see these crevices.

I rang the bell after I had wiped a cobweb string from my face. It seemed no one had been to the front door in a few days. Stella came to the door and we went straight into the kitchen, where she was boiling some corn.\(^{158}\) I put a couple of beers in the freezer, as she put the rest in the refrigerator. We took the two out after a few minutes. For a snack, Stella offered hummus, an almost empty bag of kettle chips, and bread with garlic. We took this outside to the back, where at the table with attached benches for sitting she had laid out Worcestershire sauce, salsa picante, two tablecloths, and a green salsa in anticipation of our burgers.

Stella told me, “your car window has become the repository of all correspondence between us.” My wife was doing her research in Germany, and my car was parked in the spare slot in Stella’s garage. Stella would place all separation related documents—mortgage papers, bank account related forms, court summons, et cetera—on the window of my car. Doug would pick them up and return them to the same spot. “I don’t want it inside the house, you know, so he leaves all his papers and things that I have to look at, in

\(^{158}\) I’ve become more used to this taste, sweet and soft, of corn. In India we roast it on smoldering charcoal, and put lemon and a mix of salt and some spice on it.
the garage, on the car.” Locked as I was in this third position of the triad, the rupture in their relationship was also the moment when my relationship with Stella had become strained. I do not think she ever really believed me about the trip to India, and the tinge of this “betrayal” never left our conversations for long, lingering in passing references to India and his trip for over a year. My car, a material symbol of my responsibility, also became a symbolic intermediary between Stella and Doug.

She said she was going to put two burgers on for me to grill and I asked if she was not getting one for herself. “Oh mine will go much later,” she said with a smile, referring to an argument between us a month or so ago during a group meeting when her steak had not turned out rare enough. As she went back in the house, I noticed that the backs of Stella’s thighs had more cellulite than I had ever seen before. She had been proud of her physique and diligent in its maintenance. I sat in the garden and waited.

Since the beginning of 2013, Stella’s separation with Doug was an undeniable reality. From constantly referring to things he said and did (like the useful advice she passed on at a meeting – “Doug said tomatoes stay longer if you leave them out of the refrigerator”), Stella had moved to celebrating her friends and throwing elaborate lunches for the group meeting. Twice, she ordered food from a Caribbean restaurant, which she insisted was also an Indian restaurant because she saw “roti” on the menu.

Returning from my recollections of past meetings and disagreements as I finished my beer, I stood up to put the bottle into the glass trash bin. The regulation, large sized bin was overflowing with wine bottles. On top, in the center of the bottles, was a beautiful wine glass with a long stem. It was broken. I stood there almost in tears, thankful she was inside the house.
Stella had been left all alone.

**The fragility of belief - Denying Disagreement**

One can imagine it would be difficult to sustain the belief that there was a global revolution around the corner, given the violence around the world that refused to boil over into a conflagration that the COS predicted and expected. Such doubts were avoided and rarely expressed openly, and if they were, they could lead to ugly confrontation. Victor’s heresy, described in greater detail in Chapter 4, was such a moment. Victor had spoken of his doubts about how to mobilize in this era when the objective condition for those with means indicated that “life is pretty good under capitalism.” He had also spoken critically about the COS’s position on homosexuality in the sixties and seventies.\(^{159}\) Everyone became tense as Stella responded, and we waited for Stella to finish her aggressive attack on Victor. It was clear nobody should intervene. After castigating Victor for doubts about the future of communism and COS, his honest admission that life was good under capitalism and that this created a contradiction, Stella moved on to questioning his effectiveness in doing what needed to be done to recruit more members to the cause and his failure to distribute more copies of The Clash to people at his workplace and in other liberal associations of which he was a member. In a typical move in moments of such questioning, she had turned doubts about the COS and its agenda back on to personal flaws in those who expressed them. Victor, a soft spoken and very gentle person, nonetheless held his ground.

\(^{159}\) The COS had a frankly homophobic outlook, something common to left groups in the 1960s (Kelley and Esch 1999). It was justified on the grounds that the COS was under surveillance and all radicals were likely to be persecuted, and the entry of homosexuals will only make this worse. There was an incredible moment in relation to this, when a COS member told me that he realized in 2015 that this line had changed.
In passing, Victor also hinted at another important issue where the COS missed an opportunity to expand their base. After some exemplary moments mobilizing among the black community during the 1960s, the COS took a strange turn in their analysis, viewing the struggle for the rights of black people in the United States as a form of nationalism, which they were against at the time, and remain today. This identification by internationalists of the black struggle, perhaps what we might call identity politics today, was a misstep. Dynamic and strong black members left the COS amid an atmosphere of recriminations and mistrust. Given their strident and aggressive anti-racism today, there is an unacknowledged recognition (they hold to the same analysis, with the primacy of class, but translate it by focusing on racism as a form of “superexploitation” based on dividing the working class) of a mistake in adapting Marxist analysis to the concrete situation obtaining in the United States, especially in the urban black community of the North. It is easy to imagine black members (those who left and those who remained) voicing a concern of the implicit opposition between white and black created in the impasse of treating civil rights struggles as a form of nationalism. I can’t help but feel that members of the COS await the return of this accusation, shouting ever louder in the present about the falsity of racist stereotypes and trying desperately to recruit from the black community. As Helen (Stella’s daughter) had told me, living in RapCity and nearby areas was an active element of the strategy. It was, as she termed it, “an intentional community.” Given the patchy nature of recruitment, it is unclear how much this community grew and thrived.

In another way, the COS has always been divided against itself because of doubts about purity, which seem inevitable in the context of a stated ideology of anti-capitalism
completely at odds with a lifeworld suffused in capitalism. In the late 1970s, they already viewed the struggle against revisionism as largely an internal struggle between and within members of the COS, and not as a conflict between COS and other left groups that they deemed revisionist. With impressive reflexivity, COS members recognized that this contradiction, between capitalism and communism, “reflects the contradiction within each of us.” Nonetheless, they remain haunted by their own shadow.

Thinking back to Stella’s childhood and her experiences of motherhood, the investment in the COS and Stella’s active efforts to invite young black men (and also “international” men in general: this could include the immigrants she takes ESL classes with, men like me she meets at a rally) to the reading group and make them join the COS seemed of a piece with her relationship to “children,” or rather to those whom she was addressed by in a maternal role. Having faced such pain in mother-child relations, as a child and as a mother, Stella displaces her nurture to the COS and the “children” that may grow under its tutelage. The fragility of belief was exacerbated by the fact that many of those who were supposed to grow instead disappointed Stella’s hopes in one way or another, such as Doug. And me.

I have begun to recognize (and discussed above) my own relation with Stella as containing elements of an intransigent child seeking to escape control. There are other things to consider as well, pertaining to Doug and me; Doug, me, and Stella; and Stella, me, and the COS. In my own way, I discouraged Stella by not being more receptive to her during a difficult time in her life. Sure, I tried to stay in touch, help now and again with tasks; but the strange simultaneity in Doug and my estrangement (to varying

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degrees, to be sure) haunts and surprises me today. It surprises because of the neat symmetry we co-created. Stella was also involved in this symmetry, seen above in our exchange about whether I had planned this trip to India behind her back, and her refusal to believe me because it disrupted the structure of how she was relating to Doug. Did I contribute to this process? Did I also want to “fly solo”?

Furthermore, I reciprocated in these rounds of mirroring and replication in a different way as well. Increasingly unconvinced and disconcerted by the COS’s firm convictions and the inflated sense of self-importance they derived from their view of themselves, I had found it more cumbersome to keep my own assessment of their potential position in the coming revolution suspended. In losing patience with this strange idealism that only acknowledged that the utopia will appear after their own lives but did not concede that there were some gaps in the political analysis and it seemed unlikely that the COS would be the entity to lead a global, total change in society, I also frayed the ties that joined me to Stella. While she went along with making friends not only to have friends but also to struggle with them for the benefit of the COS, I went along in personifying my relationship to the COS in my relation to Stella.

**Omnipotence, Denial, Betrayal**

Stella continued to believe that Doug had often deceived her. I felt permanently tinged with at least one such betrayal, his trip to India. In a conversation over a year after our difficult exchange in the wake of Doug’s departure from the house, Stella told me she was looking at a psychiatric manual, and “there is access 1, where you have schizophrenia, borderline personality, stuff like that. Access 2 is where you have narcissism, and a couple others.” It was striking how she made it sound like Access 1 and
schizophrenia were the passé, common disorders. In access 2, they had a list of nine criteria for a preliminary diagnosis. At least three of the criteria must be met, and Doug met four of them. She mentioned at the top of the list, deception. The rest of the criteria seemed to be features Stella attributed to Doug, including a desire to hurt others. And at this point she recalled another story, one where her cousin had virtual sex with Doug. “And I asked him why, he said he wanted to hurt me,” said Stella, confirming her diagnosis. Just like with me, her cousin’s actions were another betrayal by someone she was entitled to expect loyalty from.

Quite apart from these betrayals, many of us had disappointed her. Ena had stopped coming to group meetings as she wanted to focus on starting her own independent consultancy. Dejuan had moved in and just as quickly moved out of the house and of the reading group meetings once his situation improved. I was still there but had not joined the COS (apart from being shadowed by her unshakeable suspicion that Doug had not lied alone; I could see now that it was an inescapable conclusion for Stella to reach). Some of these disillusionments were nonetheless an outcome of the untenability of some of her propositions, which in many ways were ideas given by the COS. Stella was nothing if not the most disciplined and passionate member of her collective. Disappointments were inevitable when she was compelled to realize that others did not share her commitment to the COS, even if some of us found that an analysis based on the idea of class conflict explained a lot about the current situation of inequality and exploitation in the world.

When she spoke during meetings, on drives to NYC and the grocery store, and during formal interviews, Stella’s stories and utterances would often elicit “nod along”
responses from others with a generally positive attitude towards Marxism even though they might not have agreed with the particulars of a given story or utterance. This was partly a function of the teleology of class-conflict itself. Every event, from the instability in Libya to the Arab Spring could in one way or the other confirm such a broad analysis. These forms of phatic communication, these automatic affirmations, became so many confirmations of her viewpoint (the COS viewpoint) on things.

Her ideas confirmed in this way, became in turn expectations from others. Convinced of her group’s analysis of reality and insisting on seeing all phenomena through that framework, she often got the impression everyone wholeheartedly agreed with what she had said and would now be similarly disposed. If such expectations were eventually frustrated by the behavior of others, she was liable to feel totally betrayed. ‘I thought we agreed on this, I can not believe this is not exactly how you actually feel or think,’ as it were. Put another way, she made the person in front of her participate in a confirmation of her feelings and views. Passionately conveying the details of the latest article in The Clash, be it about the humanitarian disaster in Haiti or the attacks on school teachers in RapCity (‘It is the fault of capitalism. Smash capitalism and usher in the utopian Internationalist society. Join the COS’), whether listeners received what she said often became immaterial, as long as they did not fracture her narrative with interruptions or doubts. Occasionally, someone might make small interventions, suggest alternative possible outcomes. However, in keeping with her group’s principle of democratic centralism, conversations and debates were a healthy mechanism of expressing dissent, but ultimately everyone must commit to the COS “line.”
This became typical in my conversations with Stella, which often bordered on unreal. She would begin to create a narrative around a person or event, I would nod, waiting for the narrative to develop, and surely and not too subtly these contrived, story-like (appearing fictional) transitions would emerge, mildly dramatic and resolving contradictions through simple interventions. To give an example, she talked about her granddaughter Letitia (born of the now broken relationship between her second adopted son and his ex-wife), with whom she had begun to develop a relationship. Letitia’s aunt really cared for her but started dating and could not devote as much time to her. Letitia’s grandmother on her mother’s side was also not well at the time. As a result, Letitia became unruly, throwing out the toys she played with, until Stella stepped in. In true consciousness raising fashion, Stella explained to this seven-year-old, “Letitia likes her aunt, and isn’t she happy that her auntie has a boyfriend? This is why auntie is not there all the time now like she used to be.” Letitia, the next time her aunt went away in the afternoon, called Stella, and told her auntie is away, she is with her new friend, and she is going to come back later. “You know, now Letitia has stopped throwing the toys away!” Stella reported triumphantly. Impossible to describe on paper, Stella would punctuate such idealized happy endings and felicitous resolutions with a monosyllabic, loud exultation that all those who knew her recognized as laughter.\textsuperscript{161} These happily ever after stories, thrown about like little vignettes in conversations over dinner would often produce polite smiles, all those present avoiding each other’s glances or looking straight at Stella, nodding and smiling.

\textsuperscript{161} I am reminded of Melanie Klein’s “physical concreteness of unconscious phantasy,” of “particularly obtrusive” concrete bodily mechanisms used for projections, and I can’t help but think this laughter, which is more like an exultant ejaculation of noise, is a mechanism of some sort—it is everywhere when Stella talks, and it surrounds me soon as I think of it (Spillius 1988:88).
This extended to a rather more intimate relationship with Doug.

The two of them tried counseling with a therapist. One would outline a concern, and the other would repeat it in the way they received and understood it. Stella told me after one of these sessions, “Doug acknowledged that he felt neglected because of my political work. It was a breakthrough.” When I received this text, three months into their separation, I was surprised Doug had never expressed this in the years they were together. It made me wonder if Stella was simply revisiting a narrative of breakthrough or if Doug was being disingenuous. It seemed self-evident, given their arguments over thanksgiving dinners, his resistance to doing things related to the COS, and their conflicts over the time Stella spent socializing with group members or doing group-related work. He had told me once, “if we break up, it will be because Stella loves the COS more than me.”

I could see Stella’s perspective: five to six years of accumulated exchanges could easily have created expectations that could lead to a feeling of betrayal when these expectations were not met. She might have felt, for instance, that the repeated proclamation that she has abandonment issues from childhood and does not understand his need to fly solo would result in a total purging of this desire from Doug. When that did not occur, as he expressed the desire to go somewhere again, she broke down, at the return of this moment and her concomitant feelings of abandonment. It was entirely plausible that Doug could never convey his sense of neglect forcefully enough to Stella. Why did Doug not find a way to convey over time that certain things were not as she thought they were? Sad, she felt the world was against her, she had been betrayed again.

Perhaps, now that he had moved out and they were indisputably separated, Stella could not remain in denial. Now that they were physically apart, he could express in a
way she had to receive, with a third person (therapist) present. Nonetheless, her steadfast optimism shone through and she continued to do her work, write plays, follow up on cases of detention of undocumented persons, and seek young potential recruits for the COS.

But the denial seemed to return instantly. One morning an excited and happy Stella repeated the story of this breakthrough with Doug at the annual May Day rally of the COS. She seemed to think that this knowledge (Doug’s sense of neglect), which she finally received, made things better with Doug. For him this insight, this acknowledgment, was a vignette in his “parting letters to Stella,” something to help the “transition,” as Doug referred to the process of separation. For her it was a sign that he had new insight, an epiphany that would resolve contradictions in their relationship. She refused to accept the relationship was over.

From occasional encounters or exchange of messages on the phone with Doug, I could see that he had a different view of what was happening between Stella and him now that they were separated. While for Stella, the therapy sessions were an attempt to repair and reconstruct their relationship, for Doug they seemed to be steps towards a gentler breaking of the threads that tied them together. It was difficult to maintain this third position, living close to my friend and then also being in contact with her estranged husband. After a period of extreme discomfort and eventual anger at what I concluded was Doug’s disingenuousness, I confronted him one afternoon. Did he simply want a settlement that would sustain him economically after their ties were legally broken? When would that occur? Did Stella have a sense of his thoughts? Doug and I did not meet or speak again for two years.
In January of 2013, Stella was quietly expectant about reconciliation with Doug. He was being nice of late, she thought it was because he had realized that it would be better to move back in with her, as opposed to now, when he was living off his friends and mother. But she wanted to wait till he got his own place and showed he could be self-sufficient. While expectant about Doug’ return, she was having trouble sleeping again because of pain in her arms. “This is around the time when my son died, so of late my arms are killing me, you know about this, he passed on the 15th of this month.” The drudgery of being single was also weighing on Stella.

I’ll take an apartment any day, you don’t have two doors to look after… oh god, every task, like getting logs for the fire, its such a chore… but it feels nice, like the other day, I broke up these logs and was picking them up when a possum came out, and I was like ‘awww, you sweet possum, I’m taking away your home, awww, will you be ok.’ But then I saw that he went into the other logs that were there. I looked to see if any babies would come out but no, so he was fine.

A Fraught In-conclusion

The disproportionate investment in the COS, a group and an idea, often to the detriment, or as a displacement, of actual relationships with people that may or may not share this commitment to a messianic revolutionary future, speaks to a fundamental condition of lack. The inability to historically, temporally, and literally and existentially cross the street into the “intentional community” of RapCity, and the expectation not to experience the ecstasy of the revolution leaves the COS and its members suspended. This small society displaces their embrace of the revolution in lived history, instead placing it in a future where they will be no more. They are hence martyrs, witnesses to the coming of a messiah. Stalin has come to occupy this iconic space. It is not that this space is empty; they are trying to tie it back to the past (to a revolution that Stalin betrayed), and
displace it into the future, where Stalin will return with the iconic power of the savior, of
the new Christ. The COS ideology then, suspended in the present between the past and
the future, and this indeed is the function it performs, is about the truth (realization) of the
dogma of the new messiah. That it will not be realized is essential to the maintenance of
this dogma, and for it to perform in turn the sustaining, nurturing, or holding function that
it does for the COS. The revolution will come (or at least World War III), but not in our
lifetime.

Yet, this thing or moment they seek to be witness to (at the same time as they do
not, because they expect, even hope to die before that moment), is geographically and
epistemologically a non-place. It is an origin that never was: Stalinism was never about
revolution; it was about terror. It was akin to the terror of the French revolution that ate
its own children. Stalinism is also about the denial of experience. Embracing this version
of Marxism as an ideology implies the denial of lived experience as their backward
looking and forward facing ideas show for the COS. Stella did not face her and others’
human failures, her experiences. Instead, the terror of Stalinism petrified her experience
in a salutary way, violence and anti-racism proving an attenuated form of sufficiency in a
frame that fixes the co-ordinates of her life. The rest—the car, the job, the money, the
pension, the mortgage, the husband and his individualism, the young international and
diverse men—is mere detail, either the reluctant life in capitalism, or preparation for the
coming revolution. The coming revolution, in turn, is one end of the bridge that the COS
stands on, the other being the moment of revelation and hope when the COS was created.
In the middle of a century where hope sprang and then was betrayed everywhere: be it
communism in Eastern Europe, or capitalist democracy in the United States, the COS
became suspended. Aside from the time and place of the soviet revolution and Stalinism that they did not live through, this was the first concrete moment of hope and its loss, the moment when the possibility of radical social change appeared and then dissipated as society, the working class, the masses did not respond to their efforts at mobilization. The key they had found to enter into their life, a critical view on their disenchantment, opened no more doors. Socialism became ossified in the world, Khruschev betrayed Stalin who defended the revolution, and China betrayed Communism and became a revisionist, state-capitalist regime. Meanwhile, capitalism in United States refused to collapse. A member of the COS who had spoken to me once about their youthful plans in the 1960s had said, “we expected to be mobilizing for violent armed conflict in the 1980s, and that moment has not come to pass.” He rationalized his disappointment by invoking the other lost enemy, the fascist that had no real experiential validity for the COS. “If we had not done what we did, of course, we would be surrounded today by fascists in jack boots.”

Effectively, within its short history of upsurge, the COS worked itself into a standstill. Reality proved obdurate to the analysis of inevitable revolution, and nothing much changed or fit in the same way that it seemed to during the 1960s and early 1970s. Unlike other groups that disbanded, and like a few others that continue to work, the COS persists. It simply became a private entity, underground in its own estimation, paranoid, concerned about being under surveillance (but benefiting from this thought because it implied a continuing relevance), committed, and presenting itself as a spectacle periodically to the world. The May Day march, often not held on May Day, provides an annual ritual of confirmation for the COS.
It is also this displacement of a lack that must be maintained, this bridge with the past on one end and the future on the other that they must continue to stand on that prevents Stella from crossing the street and actualizing her anti-racism. It is a strange situation: the COS is gratuitously anti-racist, and has quite a few members of color. However, just as with the middle class leadership of the civil rights movement at the time of the Watts riots, it seems that there is a class barrier to them working in greater proximity with, and understanding deeper the issues of the so called underclass, or the struggling urban community of color that lives right next door and all around in RapCity. The class barrier is especially ironic given their political orientation and their vision of a world without classes. A Bourdieuvian explanation might do a lot in explaining how their habitus produces forms of action and practices of consumption that again disavow their beliefs, preventing them from finding ways to develop connections across class and ethnicity. At the same time, we have seen how Stella has trouble maintaining connections within her own class group as well. Again, it seems a denial of lived experience allows for another displacement: that of the spatial inability to cross the street, into a temporal ideology that can never be fulfilled.162

**Cruel Optimism? Or an Optimism that turned Cruel?**

Lauren Berlant reflects on the desiccation of the American Dream in the United States, and the attenuation of the post-war promise of social democracy in general since the 1980s. An enduring attachment to hopes that were part of public culture but are no longer viable produces a situation of obstinate habits, as it were. These habits are harmful given the present conditions, but they cannot be abandoned without risking an ultimate

162 Or at least, it seems, the COS hopes that it is never fulfilled at the same time as it repeatedly proclaims its inevitability.
crisis of the self. Put another way, cruel optimism is a situation in which the subject finds that the very attachments that give one hope and the ability to live, also persistently make life difficult. Attachments that constitute the self but have become unrealizable suspend the subject. This suspension is not simply inertia, but an oscillation that hinges on a possibility, swinging back and forth between two ends, the hope of realization and the despair of impossibility, never resting on either. While specific to her disciplinary orientation in literary interpretation, Berlant’s observations track the movements of what is generally associated with the Reagan-Thatcher era, and analyzed in other disciplines under the rubric of neoliberal effect on the polity, economy, and the subject (Berlant 2006, 2007, 2008).

It is easy to see a resonance between cruel optimism and a desire for what seems an impossible revolutionary hope, an attachment to the good object that is the vision and ideology of the COS. There are specific dissonances that need accounting for, however. Stella ostensibly does not attach herself to “a fantasy of the good life, or a political project” (Berlant 2011:1) within the implicit boundaries outlined by Berlant, that is, capitalism and the liberal hope for an embedded democracy. More significantly—and this is where ethnographic historical detail serves to periodize more accurately and even modify appropriately the formulation ‘cruel optimism’—Stella’s attachment was formed, strictly speaking, before the post-Fordist age of which Berlant speaks had commenced. While the first claim, about Stella’s attachment being transcendent to capitalism, might still be reconciled with capitalism itself, the latter requires a reformulation of Berlant’s idea that might simply go thus: there are forms of attachment that are not constitutively cruel and optimistic. They may refer to apparently objective possibility, and fire the
imagination. Over time, contingently, they may fade from objective possibility. It is now that they become cruel, since it is difficult, if not impossible to surrender the desire that has fired the attachment to a certain object. It is now that they turn cruelly optimistic, persisting in the potentiality of perennial (non)possibility that has become constitutive of the subject and the subject’s world.¹⁶³

This reformulation may appear a minor quibble; at the same time, it does reveal the value of a concrete ethnographic perspective and a rather “modernist” attention to time. In the same view, it does render Berlant’s account ahistorical, even timeless. To be sure, Berlant works with an awareness of current events in the work, and I am in no way suggesting that Berlant conducts the interpretations unaware of world events. Nonetheless, to the extent that her project includes the idea of a public affect and seeks to capture a moment that is not merely individual but social, I think it is important to recognize this point.¹⁶⁴

However, it is the following that makes use of the idea worthwhile: “Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss” (Berlant 2006:21; Berlant 2008). I have tried to address the interesting deferral—which indicates a very realistic assessment of the prospects of revolution at the same time as it pushes its possibility away—from a different angle in the next chapter.

¹⁶³ This historical reformulation is based on my ethnographic material and is informed by Melanie Klein’s conception of good (and bad) external objects and corresponding internal objects. The loss of the external good object is often denied in this fashion, because there is so much invested in the internal phantasmatic good object.

¹⁶⁴ Much more so than criticisms of elitism and convoluted language.
Tusting Bourgeois Anthropologists

The megalomanic view of oneself as the Elect, wholly good, abominably persecuted yet assured of ultimate triumph; the attribution of gigantic and demonic powers to the adversary; the refusal to accept the ineluctable limitations and imperfections of human existence, such as transience, dissention, conflict, fallibility whether intellectual or moral; the obsession with inerrable prophecies … systematized misinterpretations, always gross and often grotesque … ruthlessness directed towards an end which by its very nature cannot be realized—towards a total and final solution such as cannot be attained at any actual time or in any concrete situation, but only in the timeless and autistic realm of phantasy.

[Norman Cohn in Hofstadter (1996 [1965]: 38)]

The Anti-Racism Pamphlet

We must be careful when trusting the bourgeois anthropologists who trailed the imperialists as they carved up the globe in the late 1800s, but perhaps their reports are true.165

In the margin above this footnote in a pamphlet titled “Smash Racism: A Fighter’s Manual,” I had written a single word: “True.” It was true that anthropologists followed colonizing powers into areas that had been taken over by force, their populations subjugated. How entwined were the interests and objectives of colonial administrators and those of anthropologists; the relative influence of anthropologists on colonial policy; and their personal political views are matters of contention.166

165 All unattributed quotes are from materials such as newspaper, pamphlets, and handouts. More details are given where it was possible, in my judgment, to do so without compromising confidentiality.

166 Colonialism did create the conditions for extensive anthropological fieldwork as it emerged in the 19th and early 20th century. It is debated how relevant anthropologists and their work was to policy makers and administrators, and certainly how influential their “reports” were. The subject of occasional reflection during the colonial period, critical assessment of the relation between anthropology and colonialism was taken up more explicitly during the mid 1960s and foregrounded during the 1970s (Lewis 1973). Rather than the idea that anthropology served as the “handmaiden to colonialism,” the consideration of what influence power asymmetries and a European background had over the creation of anthropological knowledge (Asad 1973; Pels 1997) seems much more significant (nonetheless, for a veritable manifesto of how anthropology “could” become an integral cog in colonial administration, see Driberg 1927. Also see Campbell 1998 for a retrospective view of this relationship in Australia). See Rattray 1928 for a sample of the ambivalent relationship between colonial power, Christianity, and anthropologists as articulated by a
It is the first part of the line that draws attention: “we must be careful when trusting the bourgeois anthropologists.” It seems overwrought. The reports of the bourgeois anthropologists, which the authors of this pamphlet urged us to suspiciously trust, suggested an era of primitive communism. Perhaps these reports, tainted as they are by imperialism and the bourgeoisie, are true. They suggested a past era of communism. What was in the past might be again in the future.

This pamphlet was produced by an activist group that I call the COS. Many of its original members became activists during the 1960s and participated in the student movement. Like other activists at that time, they also tried to organize workers in the industrial sector. As time passed, the moment of revolutionary hope, the decade of the Great Refusal (Marcuse 2002 [1964]), and the last large wave of global decolonization slowly left the political scene. Today, first generation members of the COS and a younger generation continue to work towards what their analysis reveals to be an inevitable global conflict presaging the revolution that will end capitalism worldwide. The COS has designs on being at the vanguard of the revolution that follows.

True: My engagement with the COS had involved many such moments when I could not but affirm, in general outline, what they claimed. Something rang true about a class based analysis and critique of capitalism, even more so for someone born and raised

“Government Anthropologist” (Kuklick 1978:94, 105). See Kuklick 1978 and Mair 1978 for differing views on this issue, as well as consideration of theoretical paradigms in anthropology and their influence on colonial administration. Given that individual anthropologists even today work with U.S. intelligence agencies in places such as Iraq, the matter is not put to bed one way or another by any stretch. We need also to consider historically the collaborative role of anthropologists in other periods of conflict. This is an issue requiring much deeper treatment than I can provide here.

To return to the matter at hand, it is the issue of mistrust (“we must be careful when trusting the bourgeois anthropologists”) in those identified with the bourgeoisie and imperialism that is salient. For the delimited purposes of the anti-racism pamphlet, anthropological debates alluded to here were of little interest to the COS.
in India, socialism enshrined in the preamble to the Constitution. Nonetheless, dire predictions of inter-imperialist rivalry and World War III; a language that seemed anachronistic, of “the bosses,” “the rulers,” “the ruling class”; persistent, somewhat comical, references to the police as “KKKops” (as if the police force was a subgroup of the Ku Klux Klan, or the mere use of the word “cops” induced stutters; or both): these left one with a strange feeling of unreality, given the earnest sincerity and complete conviction with which many members enunciated these words and the ideas attached to them. A sense that was often reinforced when combined with consternation and frustration I felt in face of the smiling indulgence I encountered when I spoke to about the COS with those who did not know of them.

**Living in the face of Doubt**

So, I’ve met these people in the field. They are quite serious and committed. They’re radicals, can you believe it! They live in RapCity and in Sleepytown, and have a presence in Boston, Chicago, even the west coast. They even have people in 12 other countries, they’re getting quite big!

The smile spreading across her face gave me pause. She said:

“Big, eh? You mean they’ve gone from 50 to 76 members, hm?!"

Look, they predict a global conflict, the next World War. At the end of it, there will be a revolution worldwide, and they will lead it. I’m planning to start attending their meetings. They are very diligent and disciplined about holding them. They bring out a bi-weekly newspaper…

By now the conviction had begun to fade from my voice, and the interest from my teacher’s face, smiling indulgently at me. Early during fieldwork, filled with immersion-based enthusiasm, I was telling one of my teachers about the COS, parroting the lines I had heard.

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167 Most schoolchildren memorized the following lines, unforgettable even after many years: “We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, secular democratic republic…”
A friend of mine once visited a meeting of the COS. Afterwards, this friend would often ask me with gently mocking affection, “so how is the great COS doing, is the revolution here yet? Are they leading it? Why didn’t I get the news?!”

These exchanges speak to the sense of disorientation, even disquiet, that I experienced when listening to the rhetoric of the COS (Smash racism! Smash capitalism!). It was produced by the rather obvious question of how members of the COS square their beliefs with their everyday lifeworld. Apart from coming together to rally and protest and read The Clash, their revered periodical, members of the COS also meet each other at weddings, birthdays and other social events. In this way, they engage in practices that create a microcosm of the world they envision. Although sustained by this intra group sociality, they have not separated themselves completely from society as in a commune. Far from it. Members of the COS participate in occupations in the mainstream capitalist economy, and live in the society they so detest. They are teachers, nurses, mid level managers, administrative officials. How does one name an enemy, when the enemy is all around and also within, that is, when it has no location? How does one protect oneself against such a foe?

The COS members themselves must have experienced this incredulity that I encountered when speaking about them. They are often striving to effect their vision, actualize it in the world by approaching friends, relatives, and strangers at public events. Distributing their newspaper, The Clash, is a central element of the COS’s strategy for bringing the truth to the blind. In fact, the newspaper was instrumental in how Stella and I had met each other. At a protest event against cutbacks in New Jersey teachers’ positions and benefits, I bought the paper from her and engaged in a conversation. This exchange
between us set in motion the chain of events that led to me doing fieldwork in RapCity-Sleepytown.

Rejections are sometimes patently unfair, such as when a woman walked back to us at Zucotti Park, where Stella and I had gone to watch the Occupy Wall Street movement. The woman came back to return the newspaper she had taken from us because it was printed in both Spanish and English. “This should be only in English. My family is from Spain, and we all speak English. People must learn English if they have to live in America,” she said. Stella was inflamed, and could only say, “NO,” loudly in agitation a couple of times, finding no other words to counter a stranger’s rejection of her offering. It was doubly unexpected, because the woman had taken the newspaper at first, which both of us were offering to people passing by. It was an unbidden gift, an offering of the truth to everyone, anyone, in the hope that they would see the truth and join us. Most people nodded, smiled and refused, or ignored us, or scowled as they walked past, but this woman had taken the paper and walked away. Stella felt her job was done successfully; another soul had received the eye opening revelations about the real nature of the world and might turn towards COS, and towards revolution. When it did not turn out this way, she floundered.

But now, in Zucotti Park, her gift was being returned, rejected. “NO,” she shouted, saying no to the return as much as to the woman’s belief that everyone must speak English if they are to live in this country. Her gift had failed to be propagated in the world, and she could not accept this. NO.

Such a negation placed Stella, and the COS, in a paradoxical situation. Either the paper was for those who might agree anyway, in which case there was nothing to do
beyond making her periodic round, giving the paper to friends and associates from different walks of life that knew her and discussing it with other members of the COS. Or the paper was to light the spark of revelation and revolution in those who were ignorant, blinded by bourgeois ideology and the capitalist system. The latter would not come around without a struggle, and there was the paradox. Many of them would say no, and Stella could not return their negation with a “no” of her own, if she was to struggle with them and convince them. Yet, in the face of such hardened ignorance, such hatred of non-English speaking immigrants, Stella lost her reason and was reduced to quivering anger. “NO.” Committed to an iron clad set of beliefs and a course of action, dissent was immediately existential for her.

In the group meetings that she organized as the local leader of one of many groups, Victor (another COS member) had once expressed dissent. While Stella’s reaction was more eloquent than to the woman who returned her newspaper at Zucotti Park, the encounter with doubt about her beliefs was no less existential, and her pronouncements and criticism amounted to a negation of Victor and his work for the COS. Still, they eventually reconciled. It was the outside world, the others such as this anti-Spanish language immigrant from Spain that caused Stella (and other members) to flounder. Faced with lack of acceptance (whether of the paper or of their ideas in general), they seemed to withdraw. To be sure, there was often a calm conviction, the strength of knowing “the truth” in the face of such situations; but still.

There were other elements too. In their discourse, there proliferated a fetishization of violence. The COS are anti-racism, and profess an almost gleeful excitement at the prospect of smashing the racist capitalist system. They are anti-racist, and they seek to be
violent. They are vehemently anti-racist, and they are gratuitously pro-violence. They are fanatically anti-racist and violent. They are violently anti-racist.

These multiple formulations of anti-racist violence barely approximate the same sense of unreality one experienced when faced with the rather settled, pacified, middle class, one might even dare say bourgeois, lives of most members that I met. It is important to point out, for ethical reasons and also for this same discordance that I experienced and am trying to describe here, that I have never personally witnessed any member of the COS commit an act of provocation at a mass event, or incite any kind of violence.

**The Black Woman Speaks, Or, Class vs. Identity and Experience**

“True:” It was a strange word that I had written in the margin of the anti-racism pamphlet, conferring validation on the analysis of racism, or the mistrust of anthropologists tainted by imperialism. Or maybe I was enlisted into a sympathetic reading, given that I was trying to learn more about this remarkable group of people, and in this particular instance because I had been entrusted to present this pamphlet. I regularly attended the meetings of a small local subgroup of the COS. Presentation duties were rotated when possible, and I was entrusted with starting the discussion about racism and the COS’s anti-racist perspective, as outlined in this pamphlet (and, inevitably, linked to the only solution: an internationalist revolution).

The discussion was specifically catered to Ena, a young female African American professional who was Stella’s buddy at the gym and occasionally visited our meetings. Ena was trying to ration her involvement and devote more time to her professional and personal pursuits. Stella was trying to keep her involved. Stella hoped that Ena, just like
me and other people of a younger generation, would eventually come around, recognize the truth, and join the COS.

Four of us were at the meeting—Stella, Ena, Keith and I. Keith, a long time member of the COS, was a music teacher and an accomplished musician. I began presenting the pamphlet by describing the COS view that capitalism and racism are joined at the hip from birth. Capitalism is built on the racialized division of the working class, and the disproportionate exploitation of workers of color.

After I presented the main arguments of the pamphlet, Ena shared a very candid and personal recounting of her view of race relations in the U.S. and the kind of feelings many black families deal with everyday: being “less than,” worrying whether the children gone to school will return safely or become random victims of violence, struggling with unspoken prejudices at workplaces and in other institutional contexts. Ena cried almost as soon as she began, but then composed herself and continued, explaining what the experience of being black in the United States meant and how it affected her thoughts not

168 The anti-racism pamphlet takes account of the historic phenomenon of racism, and relates it to the advent of capitalism. In Europe and the Americas, the exploitation of white workers is built “on the foundation of racist superexploitation [the COS’s term for capitalist exploitation of workers of color].” The pamphlet was quite comprehensive, examining the history of the slave trade, the codification of racism in the U.S. South, eugenicist theories that held sway till the 1940s, and the continuing racial disparities in income, housing, education and incarceration. While the focus was on African Americans, the pamphlet covered Latino immigrants, racism against Arabs in the post 9/11 era, Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, drawing a link between the wars in Korea and Vietnam and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as motors of capitalist profit built on demonization of Asians and Arabs. The civil rights movement was given its due for their bravery against segregation, but faulted for the liberal, accommodationist positions they developed, which led to the isolation of black folk from the rest of the working class. The “Black Belt Thesis” addressing six southern states where the population of blacks constituted a potential “Negro Nation,” was acknowledged for putting the superexploitation of black workers on the agenda, but criticized for being nationalistic in orientation. In its final section, the pamphlet describes the concrete actions of the COS in building multiracial working class unity. COS’s innovation is their term “superexploitation,” which refers to the special exploitation of minorities and persons of color under a profit driven capitalist system. Class remains the salient analytic category, and while more nuanced than other materials I have read from the COS, eventually the idea of difference is surpassed if not obliterated by the idea of one working class. Nonetheless, this document provides a detailed historical analysis and a strong intellectual argument for the priority of class warfare over racial conflict as a resolution of the problem of racism. David Harvey might approve.
just about this society, but also the ideas outlined in the anti-racism manual of the COS, the doctors without borders that would cure all ills with revolution.

Ena had expressed doubts in the past about interracial trust in the context of a revolution, citing her father’s distrust of white folk, growing up as he did in segregated United States and having suffered abuse even though he served the country in the Vietnam War. In her response to Ena’s doubts, Stella usually asserted the inevitable dissipation of racism with an internationalist revolution, because communism would create people with a new consciousness. Ena was not so certain about the inevitability of the revolution, or the relations between blacks and whites before, during, and after.

During my presentation and Ena’s response, Keith and Stella had nothing to say. What kept recurring to me, during the discussion and nearly two years later as I recounted the event to Ena, was the strange, enlightened self-satisfaction of Stella and Keith. When we exchanged a glance as Ena was wiping her tears, Keith smiled at me. Stella smiled throughout, not without kindness. Their smiles seemed to radiate a knowing sense, as if they were on to something we were not. Like they had a secret, a knowledge, a key to not just one but a whole series of questions, perhaps to all the relevant questions and not just the special exploitation of women, the exploitation of white workers built on top of the “superexploitation” of ethnic and racial minorities.

Ena felt, like me, that there was nothing expressed by them in this conversation, little offered in return to her sharing. They simply smiled in a patronizing affection, as if the young children do not understand, not yet anyway. “They will learn over time, with the right education, what we know is true. We are safe in the knowledge that ultimately
we have the truth, the ultimate truth; come join us and learn it, why don’t you?” their silence and enigmatic expressions seemed to say.

“Fight Racism!”: Anti-racism is the central plank of the COS’s work today. There might have been an element of complacence in Stella and Keith’s response to Ena’s emotional reaction to a discussion about racism. It was certainly not the first time they had broached the subject of racism with potential recruits. There might have been a certain parental indulgence as well. Ena was the object of the discussion, an African American woman living in the United States. Perhaps her presence and presentation of her experience was on display somewhat, an instructive and exemplary case of the kind of problems the internationalist revolution will solve once and forever.

Or was it something else? Did something affect Stella and Keith when faced with two persons of color, one from the U.S. and another “international,” the purported “Red Army of thinking workers / soldiers” that the COS hoped to raise? Was it a kind of silence brought on when the imagined interlocutor of color is physically present, and verbalizes doubt? Is it that the question of racism is intellectually resolved, but induces silence when a racial subject puts some sand into the smoothness of the analysis, expresses concerns that exist in the present while the solution promises to automatically resolve them in the future with a mass, violent revolution? Attending the memorial for the Founder of the COS shed light on some of these questions about their history, its relation to the wider history of the 20th century, and members’ relationship to their ideological beliefs in the present. Just like Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, the COS have their own visionary leader too, and their adulatory forms of commemoration that serve to reinforce their belief and commitment.
The Leader

At the memorial for the Founder of the COS, held in a church in New York and in a few other cities, a booklet was handed out memorializing the deceased leader. It featured a picture of him giving a speech, looking into the distance, one hand up and slightly behind his head, fist clenched; as if he were about to raise his fist, or was using it to refer to someone he was talking about, a group like “the bosses,” or “the liberal misleaders.” This is the impression the poised fist evoked in me, that it was about a group or idea that the COS had to set itself against, that was either directly opposed to the COS (such as capitalism), or one that was perhaps good intentioned (such as a liberal protest group), but with an incorrect understanding of the actual class character of the conflict. In both cases, it amounted to the same thing as far as the COS was concerned. The target of the fist was worthy of vitriolic abuse, either for being evil, or for colluding with evil through ignorance. In his other hand, somewhat absurdly, he held two, possibly three microphones, and another one was mounted on a stand next to him.

The booklet told us that the Founder was a middle class man who chose to work in a factory to organize workers. Initially a member of a now stagnant leftist formation, he left that group in the early 1960s to start his own initiative. This was the period of multiple splinters in left formations. The Founder of the COS was critical of his erstwhile group’s de-radicalization, its compromise with reformist politics and the liberal democratic process. Like some other materials of this kind, this booklet sought to establish a continuity between the international socialist movement and the COS. It claimed he was “another link in the historical chain” of great Marxists, from Marx to Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, and the “architect of a new concept: one international working
class with one international party, leading workers directly to internationalism.” In this way the COS very self-consciously assimilated itself to world history, to the history of the great intellectual and social movement we know today as communism or socialism.

Reading the booklet before the memorial ceremonies commenced, I made a note about an association that struck me at the time. There is a character in the film “Inglourious Basterds” (sic), a young Jewish man from Brooklyn. He was a tough and aggressive young man, bludgeoning fascists to death with his baseball bat. I was reminded of him in this moment of distraction as I thought about several COS pamphlets and passages in their newspaper that harkened back to the heydays of socialism and the glorious defense of freedom against fascism by the Red Army during the Second World War. The booklet was filled with passionate and aggressive language extolling the militant outlook of the Founder.

The film character was known as “the Bear Jew.” It was quite stunning, when I returned to the first pages of this memorial pamphlet three years after attending the memorial, to learn that the Founder had in fact served in the army. Before founding the COS, the booklet told us, their future leader had lied about his age to join the army and fight fascists during World War II. After the war, he returned “home to Brooklyn from the Army.” I had no recollection of having found these facts remarkable when I read the pamphlet at the memorial, or thinking of a fictional Jewish character from a film in relation to them. I had long forgotten, or even barely ever remembered, these facts until the association fell upon me again on a day during the winter three years later.

The Founder’s last name was quite obviously Jewish even to me, a Hindu who had only begun to learn more about how Jewish names look from my Israeli friend and
fellow anthropologist in the United States. I could imagine the Founder, although he was North American by birth and atheist by ideology, burning with anger against fascists and their actions against the Jewish people of Europe. The hatred for fascism continues today, where COS members vigilantly look out for it, seeking out the fascism in a person, an event, a ruling class action.\textsuperscript{169} In fact, fascism is the enduring enemy, and while defeated in World War II, the COS continues to invoke it, haunted by its absence yet finding evidence of its presence in current events. Every movement needs a target, and the COS has two: fascism, and capitalism. The former is absent, yet they call out to it. The latter forms the backdrop to their very existence, all around and within.

**Violence**

As I read the booklet at the memorial, I was thinking of and trying to be struck by the aggressive and forceful language of the memorial booklet, the anti-racism pamphlet, and other writings produced by the COS. I tried to remain open, searching for a credulity that would make this language as concrete and “real” for myself as it seemed for some of my interlocutors. We were once at a COS meeting with some students invited by one of the younger COS members. The basic ideas of class conflict, capitalism (a system built to benefit the bosses), and the internationalist perspective (the world knows no boundaries of nationality or race), the prospects for mankind’s future, and the group’s relation to it were being discussed. The COS members shared their agenda with the students for the first time, in this relatively safe setting of a member’s home. The by now familiar themes

\textsuperscript{169} Stella had called Obama a fascist (see chapter 3). Canela and I had attended a church service at a co-worker’s church, and reporting back to the group, Canela viewed one of the men who was part of group discussions after the service as a proto-fascist. The evidence of his fascistic tendencies? This man had insisted repeatedly that the Judeo-Christian tradition be recognized as foundational to the United States. At other times, and in a pamphlet, the COS referred to liberal capitalism as fascism in suits, hidden in plain sight because it was not dressed in jack boots.
of the evils of capitalism were trotted out: superexploitation, sexism, racism, nationalism, and the international revolution as solution.

One of the teenage students raised a doubt, asking whether the bosses would not react badly when the workers try to take power. With gravity in her voice and a look of seriousness on her face, the young COS member who had invited them made what appeared to be a declaration of intent as well as a sharing of confidence. She fixed the teenager with a gaze and said with a stark, definitive expression, “the COS believes in violence,” before leaning back. She and other members of the group said nothing more when the teenager tried to debate this, saying, “well we have to be better than them, how will we make change like this, doing what they do will make us no better” and so on. I was a participant in the discussion, and suggested to the teenager, who was interested in COS and perhaps thought about joining, or maybe was only there for this one instance because she did not want to say no to the invitation, that sometimes power is not simply wrested from the bosses through democratic means, and the bosses may often employ violence against anyone with the agenda of revolutionary, systemic change.

However, the discussion did not go too far. The young COS member seemed to have said all that needed to be said on this issue, and all others withdrew with nods. There was almost a collective exhalation, basking in the certainty and satisfaction offered by the unflinching ennunciation of the simple solution to the problem of actually seizing power. I had seen this moment before, a calm exhilaration and relief at expressing to an outsider the ultimate objective and the way to reach it. A pressure seemed to have been released by revealing oneself to outsiders.
It is important to make clear again that the COS is entirely peaceful in its activities. I have never witnessed, or heard of, a member provoking anyone at public gatherings or protest rallies. They do recall fondly some moments of confrontation in the United States; violence, the word itself, continues to figure prominently in the COS rhetoric, but appears at odds with their peaceful, pacific existence. In a way, this violence seems spectral, in that it harkened back to a glorious era of revolutionary upheaval that led to the formation of the USSR, when it might have been said to contain an element of necessity. Crucially, more than the 1917 revolution, the COS recalls the crimes against Stalin committed by revisionists such as Nikita Khruschev who tarnished his legacy. Members are keen to discuss how Stalin “defended the revolution” much more than the revolution of 1917 itself.

The affinity for a rhetoric of “mass, violent revolution” attached the COS to a history they did not personally experience. It also shed light on their affinity for Stalin and (in their view) his glorious defense of the revolution against traitors and enemies. That the world knows this defense as The Purges (McCauley 2003 [1983]), did not detain them. Having asked as many members as I dared about the historical argument that Stalin killed a large number of proletarians and socialist leaders to consolidate his own position, I received a generally consistent answer composed of two points: Stalin defended the revolution (giving the violence a cleansing, virtuous tinge), and the number bandied around regarding The Purges (20 million) was a gross exaggeration.

170 COS members had once disrupted a rally of the Ku Klux Clan, the white supremacist organization. One member had pretended to be a Klan member to get close to the speaker’s podium, and eventually punched one of the Klan members. They had also been in a few street skirmishes with anti-desegregation activists in Boston during the late 1960s and early 1970s.
I was left with the urge to engage in a mock compromise, some kind of bargaining or haggling, as if I were negotiating a number at a flea market: “So, it was not 20? How about we halve that, 10? Why don’t I give you another 50% discount on that; let’s say 5 million? Is that okay? So we can agree that Joseph Stalin ordered the imprisonment, exile, or death of 5 million people only, expelling them from the Party and effectively expelling them from membership of a society where the Party was the State was the Society?”

As for the defense of the revolution, there was a cause compelling the leader to act the way he did. Quite akin to Buddhists in Russia and China who treat Stalin as the reincarnation of the Blue Elephant, “destined by a fate beyond his control to unleash terrible events,” (Humphrey 2003:175) members of the COS cling to the hard won “objective” truth. Stalin did what was necessary, and what he did was not as bad as the opposing side makes it out to be. After all, he saved Western Europe from fascism and for liberal democracy, he saved the world from tyranny of the fascists, and he secured the future of his own people, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Stalin acted as a true leader must, and he had no choice but to do what he did. The Founder of the COS was another leader in this historical chain, and the COS was willing to do what it had to.

The Son

Near the end of the memorial, Stella’s husband Doug texted me: “Jesus. Now I know why communism failed.” Doug was a freelance photographer, and not a member of the COS (although he did join for a while). This text message was so, so wrong for him to

171 Given that this was the position they wanted to hold, and that it was amply clear there seemed no dissonance in those who answered my question about state led violence during the dictatorship of the proletariat by talking about the actual number instead, I never actually engaged in this mock negotiation with any COS member.
write: His invocation of Jesus, his claim to knowledge about the problems with communism, and his greatest heresy, the statement that communism failed, would have put him in the doghouse with Stella if she ever saw that message. But Doug was aggravated enough to be brave, frustrated by the length of the memorial and irritated at the lack of social courtesies he had experienced with COS members before and again at the start of the memorial.  

The service began with a rendition of Bella Ciao, the famous anti-fascist Italian song. After two more revolutionary songs were sung, the speeches began. Various chosen speakers told anecdotes from their memories of the Founder, paying tribute to his great radicalism and intelligence. After a few such speeches, ranging from five to fifteen minutes, the Founder’s son came up to the microphone.

He recounted stories of his father. What was he doing with his life while his father built the group that would lead the future revolution? He drew a few giggles when he hinted a couple of times at smoking marijuana years ago when he was a young man. He alluded to being a hippie and not a revolutionary, yet finding his father a formidable figure. It was the implicit answer to an obvious but unspoken question; it was clear to everyone, and even to me who did not know him, that he was not a radical, a revolutionary, a member of the COS. He looked to me like the underachieving son of a dominant father.

These joking references came up in different stories that were connected to his relationship with his father, the COS, and other workers (like one who saw him and a friend smoking marijuana). His father rarely scolded the children, and spoke seriously to

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172 For more on Doug’s reactions to the memorial, and on Stella and Doug’s relationship, see Chapter 3.
them about their lives only once. This was in hospital, in the wake of a fatal car accident. He had said to the survivors who included his own son, “you can spend your life being fuckups, or you can decide to do something.” In many ways, this was also the COS’s view on the counterculture, the hippies, the young members of the student movement who turned on, tuned in, and dropped out. They were spending their lives being self-indulgent, and they could decide to join the COS and do something.

Once, and this was the last anecdote the son recounted, his father silenced the whole school administration. He had been called to school because the son had been “defacing school property,” by putting up anti-war posters. After he was suspended for this transgression, his father came to school. Instead of bowing down to the authority of the teachers, he went on the offensive. He told the school authorities that the school serves the capitalist system and needs to be shut down. It is the teachers who needed educating, and the students needed to be saved from them. Quite what this anti-system rant had to do with the son’s offense was uncertain. What the school personnel’s reaction to a man questioning their basic common sense, the capitalist way of life and the system that they educated in, was indistinct.

It seemed the son trotted out the story to join the chorus of eulogies, finding in his own experience something to proclaim his father’s revolutionary credentials. He came, he fought the school, he won. Even though the son had not been given to join the COS, this did not reflect poorly on the father. Clearly, his father did not neglect the revolutionary fight; even at the son’s school, he was fighting it, fighting the teachers, fighting the system. If the son, raised in this milieu infused with talk and fervor of revolution, did not
become radicalized, the father had nothing to do with it. If there was a failure of the son, it was not the father’s.

The son had a pale, callow appearance, his clothes too big for his very lanky frame, shirt tucked in but still hanging off to one side, jeans belted on to his waist, but so loose that they visibly folded in all around the belt and belt loops. After telling each story (the accident, the school, being caught smoking marijuana) there was a pause. It initially seemed a natural moment of waiting, but he seemed to have turned on himself in silence. He hesitated with words, pausing and alluding rather than making explicit the obvious difference between his father and his own life goals. He drew a few more giggles with mumbled references to “pot,” but it was futile. He could not bring more attention to his life, as that would only underscore the failure of reconciliation between his father’s example and his own life. In short order, others took over the microphone, reclaiming the legacy of the father from the son.

The memorial was enlivened by a quite surprising dedication. There was a family that caught the eye, three men and two women. The sons were dressed in corporate suits (I know, I have seen and worn them myself), and were clearly, shall we say, “capitalists.” They had perhaps reconciled to life in the system, while retaining their admiration for the person, or principles, of the Founder. Their father knew the Founder for a long time and made a long but well drafted and carefully delivered speech, extolling the father’s virtues and stressing the respect he felt for the man. At the end he said that his grandson had been named after the Founder. His son stood up in the crowd and raised up in his arms a
lovely little baby bundled up in clothes, presenting him to the people. There were loud cheers and the speech was ended.173

It was the next speech that moved Doug to irritation and exemplified what he felt was wrong about the COS members’ behavior and attitude (“they have no sense of the occasion, no sense of ceremony”). A tall white man in his late fifties, wearing thick glasses in a steel frame, a streak of hair crossed over his head to link hair on either side, and a prepossessed smile as he fell into reminiscing about the times he was around the Founder. He told one anecdote, then another, then announced he will tell one more but “I’ll put one more story before that,” showing with his hand the amount of time divided into two stacks for each story and how this one came before the one that was to come. A few members were murmuring, but stopped soon, clearly disciplined enough to be silent even if they were feeling hungry and impatient now. A couple of people got up to try and draw his attention as he alternately looked downwards and ahead at no one in particular. One of them, a woman in her sixties that I had spoken with once and exchanged a smile with a number of times, stood up and made the “time out” sign towards him while leaning forward swiftly so he might see her. He was oblivious, and took over forty five minutes before he was done. He walked away, pleased at having remembered his hero and at making a good speech on the microphone in front of so many people.174 Without

173 To my great disappointment, I later learned that this speech had been written by the COS.
174 I do not want to devalue this moment, even though it came at an inopportune time for the listeners. One often wonders what the meaning of the old Marxian term, “false consciousness” might be. Watching this man as he spoke from a small page of notes, then slowly grew in confidence and was sent into remembrance, I was reminded of a conversation with an old teacher of mine from India. I had asked him about raising consciousness, what exactly did it mean and how could one tell such a thing had happened. He described to me a speech a woman gave in a village. She was formerly illiterate, but had participated in a program of adult literacy, and worked with a local activist organization. In a place where women rarely spoke in public forums, my teacher described how much effort she put into preparation, how nervous she was, and how, by the end of the speech in front of the village, she was glowing with happiness and a new found confidence.
further ado, the memorial was ended. Folks rushed to the sanctuary in this church that had been turned into the setting for memorialization of a man who staunchly believed that religion was the opiate of the masses, to partake of whatever was on offer to eat. Everyone seemed a little nervous with hunger. I next met with members of the COS in a small group, one of many which gathered informally to receive the good word from the COS’s newspaper.

**The Reading Group**

The COS is organized into reading groups, and I attended the one in my neighborhood, held at Stella’s home. There were usually five bona fide members, and meetings were held to coincide as much as possible with the publication of The Clash, the COS’s newspaper and the central tool of its mobilizational strategy. Canela is a 37-year-old professional in a medium sized business. He had experienced debilitating back pains that spread to his legs some time before I joined the group. The diagnosis offered by Stella was that Canela was having physical problems due to stress at work and in an intimate relationship. Stella told me this without any mixture of the gravity, softness, or air of discretion that one would expect when being confided something personal about someone else, but neither did she lack concern or sensitivity. The financial crisis had hit a couple of years ago, and as part of the process of adjustment, Canela had had to take a pay cut at his job. Born in the United States, he was originally from Latin America, and

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175 Stella experienced physical pain as a manifestation of emotional stress herself, arising from the loss of her adopted son (see chapter 3). Stella’s view that part of the stress rose from Canela’s relationship with his girlfriend was in keeping with an aggressive protectiveness, or proprietary attitude she seemed to engage in with younger men. A few years later, she called me again and referred to his pregnant fiancée as “that woman, who is having his baby.” She went on to tell me that “Canela is too giving, and we need to talk to him.” Quite where else Canela could be “less giving” I do not know, but I personally felt he must do everything to care for his fiancée while she was pregnant. He felt the same way.
told me his father was political and a leftist, and growing up with him, he had always been exposed to radical ideas. When Canela came of age, he wanted to have a group to belong to, and found the COS congenial to his thinking. Having drifted away from the COS, the sudden onset of back pains brought Canela back to the reading group after this period of estrangement.

While his psychosomatic troubles from work and relationship issues did seem to get better over the three years I knew him, Canela was agitated and exercised about the actions of his 18-year-old son in the period soon after I met him. Canela’s son had cursed at his mother, fallen in with some guys older than him, and begun to participate in a fundamentalist right wing church. Canela was mortified when his son attended a celebration of Diwali at our home, but refused when my wife ceremonially sought to put red vermillion powder on his forehead as we were doing for all guests. His girlfriend had been very attentive and available during his illness, and this compelled the relationship to lurch on for another year or so. Canela was not interested in getting married, and it was getting to that stage where his girlfriend needed him to decide one way or the other. His relationship with his son’s mother had lasted only long enough for the son to be born. They realized very quickly they could not live together, and Canela had been chary of committing ever since. His investment in COS, while it waxed and waned, turned out to be steadier.

176 Near the end of fieldwork, his brother told me the humorously serendipitous story of Canela’s encounter with the COS and how he had inadvertently triggered it. “Man, I used to like having something to read in the bathroom, and this paper [The Clash] the Arabs used to have it for free at the store. So I always brought it, and Canela started reading it in the bathroom too; that’s how he found out about these people [The COS].”
Another member, Dwayne, was a postal worker. Dwayne had an infectious smile, and we complimented him on his fit and slim physique. Originally from Central America his wife was schizophrenic and did nothing for the house and kids (again, it was Stella who informed me), and his work situation fluctuated disconcertingly. Hours were cut randomly about a year after the financial crisis, the period now known as the Great Recession. Dwayne complained about his work situation during the stressful layoff process four years ago half the staff were made redundant, one of them of Indian extraction (I jokingly expressed my concern for this man and acknowledged it as my retrograde nationalism). Dwayne fortunately survived the round of job cuts, but his work prevented him from attending regularly, and we would see him infrequently.

Keith, other than Stella the most regular participant in the group, taught music and was an accomplished musician with multiple albums to his name. He also taught English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and conveyed to me his affinity for baingan bharta, an Indian dish made from eggplant and tomato. Father of two, he put a brave face on the difficulties faced by one of his children, who struggled with an eating disorder. Keith’s wife was not a member of the party, and refused to join. “Although she’s, she is very good at leftist analysis… her main disagreement with being in the party is, uh, the idea of violence… she doesn’t like to read The Clash, she does not like the word ‘smash (capitalism).’”

Victor was 60 years old, a retired scientist who occasionally worked as a consultant. Of a lean frame and vibrant disposition, he spoke thoughtfully. To make a point, he would wait after once raising his hand. He was interrupted once too often, which was odd, because he did good work for the discussion, bringing in historical
context and making points that moved the conversation forward. His wife, also not a member (like Keith’s wife), was placid and pleasant in an enigmatic way. She did not say much the couple of times I met her outside the group. Ena was a non-member but attended quite regularly, a professional with designs on a change in career and a laid back tolerance that allowed us to become friends across the various forms of cultural difference we encountered in each other. A few people brushed through the group, joining us for a dinner or on some other pretext. Some of them were members of COS, and others were young men of color that Stella was trying to recruit. While at one point she claimed at least one of them, a young African American college student, had nearly joined, I did not see him again after the two meetings he attended. The meetings were a place and time of warm sociality and didactic reinforcement, as we read articles from The Clash that highlighted racism and class exploitation and invariably concluded with the only solution: an international revolution led by the COS.

The Clash

The Clash is a small sized newspaper, usually eight pages, and is published once every two weeks in English and Spanish. It is printed on off-white newsprint paper, thin but surprisingly resilient to smudging. All group meetings are framed around the publication of the new issue, where it is distributed and an article or two is discussed before members take their copy back home.

In all settings (including, self-referentially, in the pages of the paper itself) where the sharpening struggles against capitalism, the advances being made by the working class or by the COS (often the two are easily conflated, also a feature of the pervasive and
mild form of obfuscation that obtains in The Clash), or statements about the future are made, The Clash finds mention. It is mentioned as the tool for change, and is also a marker of the hard work of any individual member. Reporting on their work of struggle (and Stella is more demonstrative in this regard as she is in all matters) members would cite the number of periodicals they distributed—be it at their workplace, in their church, at a protest, or at a mass event organized by the COS. It is the litmus of progress, and the actual active agent of change. The singularized voice of the group speaks through it. If someone receives it from a COS member, there is a greater certainty that they will see the truth, the objective reality of what is happening in the world. In turn, that increases the possibility that they will join the COS, the only adherents to truth in this world.

The COS mouthpiece does reflect the COS member. Optimistic, dogmatic, energetic, prone to exaggeration and minor obfuscation. Positive in that they continue to project an outlook of cheer and positivity, and a hope and belief in a bright utopian future for the world and their party in the face of all evidence. Dogmatic in that their focus on class war and bosses-ruling class-imperialist powers forces all analysis into these boxes. Energetic in their activities and discussion, but easy to tune out because of the stereotypical, type casted rhetoric and analysis. Prone to exaggeration in that they claim to have been involved in every major civil conflict in the U.S. since their founding, claim a presence in five continents (on a rather tenuous basis), and prone to minor obfuscations in their newspaper reporting that make it appear (sometimes through a careful arrangement of sentences) that their role in the event they report was larger than it might
actually have been. Based on a recent article (see below), following is the paradigmatic structure of most news articles in The Clash, a periodical I read twice a month for over three years:

1. A common man thinks about capitalism; things do not seem to be as he thought they are.
2. There is potential for radicalization in the news being reported.
3. Racism
4. Other progressives (activists other than COS) are misled, and are therefore “Misleaders.”
5. The only solution, is an internationalist revolution led by the COS; the COS is making progress, growing the COS is the answer.

**Antiracist School Struggle: Internationalist Ideas Hit the Mark**

“You know, all this stuff going on with the schools is really making me think more about capitalism,” said one teacher involved in the class struggle here [in RapCity]. He isn’t alone. Over the past few months, COS members have been more openly discussing capitalism and the need for internationalist revolution (emphasis added). These discussions are framed by the fightback against Superintendent John Doe’s racist attacks on schools in predominantly black neighborhoods.

‘Becoming way too radical way too fast’

One teacher had never known a internationalist before joining this struggle. He said, “I can’t believe that I would ever read a internationalist newspaper and agree with what they are saying. I am becoming way too radical way too fast.” He wasn’t alone. Many education workers and students responded… Through discussions and literature, COS members have shown that the latest crop of education reforms… are designed to discipline the working class and consolidate U.S. rulers’ top-dog superpower status.

Misleaders Ignore Racism

misleaders of the Union of Teachers (UT) and a local RapCity group… focused the blame solely on (school authorities) and ignored the contradictions within capitalism that cause schools to fail the working class. But the COS was there to offer our internationalist analysis. We distributed The Clash and had good discussions with teachers…

In our study group we have friends who fear alienating students by talking about capitalism and communism. There are workers who hold back from the mass movement because they think workers are “out for themselves.” Through friendly struggle, we’ve made progress in convincing some of

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177 It seems that this was a self-conscious editorial strategy when The Clash was competing with other groups and their periodicals in the ferment of the 1960’s, and became a habitual template over time.
these workers to get involved in the mass movement, raise internationalist ideas, and expand the COS’s base.

Over the past two weeks, the schools struggle has definitely sharpened. Our work within the reform movement gives the COS the potential to grow and provide internationalist leadership to the thousands of workers fighting back. It won’t be easy, because the union bosses and community groups are competing for the minds of the working class. But if the COS keeps fighting, building relationships, and getting The Clash to those around us, we can realize that potential. We are on our way.

(1) A common man thinks about capitalism; things do not seem to be as he thought they are.

The article begins with a quote from a teacher, who is beginning to sense something is wrong with the system. He is finally assailed by doubt about capitalism, and he is not alone.

“You know, all this stuff going on with the schools is really making me think more about capitalism,” said one teacher involved in the class struggle here [in RapCity]. He isn’t alone.

This teacher, as many others who pass through the pages of The Clash, is not alone. Many others who we do not know share this creeping sense that something is wrong, and the usual explanations do not apply. They are on the cusp of losing their naïveté about capitalism. Let the COS light the way. Now the article leaps to what the COS is doing, indicating a growing boldness to announce itself and its ideas, not be so secretive any more.

COS members have been more openly discussing capitalism and the need for an internationalist revolution. (emphasis added)

This “more open” presentation of oneself as a COS member, an internationalist, is apparently a new phenomenon in the COS. For me the reference is clear, having been told bits and pieces from COS discussions about becoming “more assertive,” “not being
afraid to speak about Internationalism.” It may be the same for the largely internal
circulation of The Clash. Still, this “coming out” is curious. It seems an almost earnest
admission of something. It was the same with the young member who told the teenager
that the COS believes in violence at an informal meeting discussed above.

Forged during the height of the Cold War, many activist groups faced political
suppression and surveillance. Accordingly, all were a little watchful about their conduct,
and alert to possible signs of being infiltrated. In a few recent news articles and in the
section on letters in The Clash, there were self-criticisms by members to talk openly
about communism and the evils of capitalism to common people, be more vigorous in
selling or distributing The Clash (the suggested price is $0.50). For instance:

The most serious weakness of my work is that very little has been done in
terms of building The COS until now. This mistake is a product mainly of
my fear of “revealing myself.”

The resonance from references made by members during my own fieldwork
experience made sense at first. But then it seemed odd that these discussions, which were
conducted in a secretive manner through an internal bulletin, were now being openly
proclaimed (I was simply handed one such bulletin at the end of a club meeting, without
a word being exchanged). There is oddness to the voice that treats such changes as
internal, and at the same time publishes them. Given that The Clash is oriented as much if
not more towards the COS membership than outsiders at this point in time, this could be
simply a function of the self-referential nature of the COS’s mouthpiece. Yet, there
seemed a little more, a desire to play out the group’s processes for an audience that is
unclear, assuaging a need for recognition and encouragement through public confession
of faults (“I need to be more sharp in my struggle, more assertive and open about being
an internationalist and presenting internationalist ideas to outsiders, I need to make more effort in selling The Clash”).

Looking further back in COS history, one repeatedly finds self-criticisms and exhortations to be more assertive, to not be ashamed of one’s internationalism, not hide it. A document from over forty years ago levels similar criticisms at COS members. The leadership criticized members who were fighting with non-leftists in civil rights struggles and other protest movements for operating “in ‘the mainstream’ without identity,” which is to say that they kept their internationalist identity hidden. Over forty years later, in self-referential moments that sound more like reports to the party leadership than like news articles, The Clash again speaks of being more assertive, being more openly internationalist.\(^\text{178}\) It seems the COS is perennially on the verge of “coming out,” revealing itself fully without shame and fear, unleashing itself on the world, for the world to see who they really are.

The dynamic between secrecy and revelation is a vexed issue. The need for secrecy may appear paranoid, but it was also realistic to the extent that there was an objective fear of persecution by government departments, which maintained dossiers on all protest organizations during the Cold-War-1960s. Additionally, being on a “list,” being in a dossier maintained by a government agency, being vigilant about infiltration: all these features of being under surveillance because one’s views are considered subversive lends a sense of importance to an oppositional group’s mission. It confirms the significance of the group’s existence, and it reinforces the desire to continue working for radical outcomes. This awareness of potential persecution, and the need for secrecy

\(^{178}\) Also discussed above, this self-referentiality is part of the dual nature of the COS; simultaneously looking inward and outward.
still permeates COS interactions. Canela will not talk in too much detail on the phone or over text, recommending that we take the discussion “offline” if it goes on too long.

At the same time, what was true in the 1960s is not true today. The importance of the COS as a group under surveillance, I venture, is more important for the COS now than it is for the government. While the suspicions of surveillance that continue to make COS members secretive are not unfounded, especially in the wake of the Edward Snowden affair and revelation of the extent to which the U.S. government through the National Security Agency spies on its own people, the conditions of this suspicion have changed. In the 1960s, there was a concerted effort by the government to watch and infiltrate radical groups and gut them from within. Socialism does not pose such a threat for the U.S. national security apparatus today. The new existential enemy is the foreign or homegrown terrorist. After the collapse of Socialism in Eastern Europe, and after 9/11, there is a need for the COS to remain relevant, to be under serious surveillance again. To not be a viable threat implies obsolescence. If there is no enemy, no Big Brother fascist-capitalist, it deflates their oppositional agenda. This is another reason why they keep calling out to the lost enemy, Fascism, identifying it where they can, fusing it with capitalism as they have since the 1970s, and trying to keep it alive because it is a source of life for them.

Every year on the weekend closest to May 1, the COS conducts a May Day rally in a few cities in the U.S., joining the international celebration to honor workers of the

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179 And it is true that security agencies may (and they may have in the past) label a group as terrorist to justify taking extraordinarily repressive measures against them. For a certain period of time, to the extent that they represented socialism or a rejection of the U.S. system, the Black Panthers and other protest groups were more likely to have been treated in this way. It is no exaggeration to say, however, that such a moment has now passed. The world is no longer divided into two polar blocs, and Socialism is not considered as much of an actually existing threat as it was during the Cold War.
world and the Chicago workers’ strike for the 8 hour working day in 1886. This is the spectacle of the COS, a show of red flags, loud chanting of slogans, marching openly down capitalist city streets as a group. At the last one I attended in 2014, some shopkeepers in the New York borough where we marched came out and watched. After a few moments, some of them went back inside. Some took The Clash proffered to them, a couple looked at it perfunctorily. Other onlookers talked amongst themselves, smiling indulgently or dismissively, some of the younger ones laughing at us too. A few others stood around, disinterested but nonetheless watching, a break from the monotony of the working day. At a pool hall after the event, a 35-year-old member spoke of having no fear of being watched: “they can come get me, I’m not scared, they know who I am, I am doing what I am going to do.” His voice simultaneously had a defiant and plaintive tone, almost like bravado mixed with a plea for recognition. Given that COS members are still (or again) being told to step forward boldly, not be shy about their beliefs, be assertive and claim their identity as communists, it seems to me today the fear is not that big brother is watching, it might also be that no one else seems to be watching anymore.

(2) There is potential for radicalization in the news being reported. In the next subsection, the article reiterates the potential for rapid radicalization of the people who have begun to feel doubts

‘Becoming way too radical way too fast’
One teacher had never known an internationalist before joining this struggle. He said, “I can’t believe that I would ever read an internationalist newspaper and agree with what they are saying. I am becoming way too radical way too fast.” He wasn’t alone. Many education workers and students responded…

People are becoming too radical. Now that we are sufficiently intrigued by this apparent groundswell, the news is introduced to conclude the paragraph. Usually this is
also the moment to frame the event in terms that can allow some recurrent COS themes to be presented, chief amongst them being racism.

(3) Racism

These discussions are framed by the fightback (sic) against Superintendent John Doe’s racist attacks on schools in predominantly black neighborhoods. Some more specific features of the event being reported are recounted before another favorite, in fact the central plank of the group’s mobilization efforts—racism—is introduced into the discussion. While here the issue was easily raised, as the majority of parents and students affected are persons of color, the larger point is that capitalist wage exploitation is racist in nature.

“Fightback!” is a popular slogan, and Racism with a capital ‘R’ is the central platform for the COS. They have persistently attempted to have more African American members, and have lately also started efforts at recruiting immigrant Latinos by having members teach English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The group in general, and certainly Stella in particular, regularly involves herself in cases related to deportation or imprisonment for undocumented individuals, following up with lawyers, and attending court dates. I met quite a few genial African American members, and was very friendly with one.

In general, the rhetoric of the COS, couched in a Marxist understanding of racism being a product of capitalist exploitation, is a valid enough view. It is not unique either, and flows logically out of a class analytic that views inequality as a product of one’s relationship to the means of production. By the same token, this analysis and the COS is subject to the familiar critiques, of class analysis trumping and obliterating other forms of
inequality and difference such as race and ethnicity; and the empirical record of socialist governments’ treatment of such minorities. If subjectivity itself was a negative word (and it was for the COS) that meant putting one’s preferences, ideas and emotions over the collective, Keith and Stella obviously would flounder if Ena were to tell them what her father thought about the idea of a violent revolution with a largely white leadership. Ena had explained COS’s vision of a global, violent revolution to take power from the capitalists to her father. He responded, “Listen here. All this talk of revolution is all very well. But don’t tell me to trust it when they (white folk) are going to decide who lives and dies.”

There was that moment with Ena at the reading group that I have returned to again. It was difficult to understand the expressions of Keith and Stella. Keith had a placid smile and his eyes seemed quite empty when he exchanged a look with me in the moments after Ena had wiped her tears and began speaking again. Their complacency now seemed more and more like a withdrawal, a retreat. Faced with Ena (in fact with two persons of color), they were unable to find a place to relate in that moment. No one was at fault, it was just the way it was. The COS was living with answers it could not enact. I will return to this moment once again.

(4) Other progressives are misled, and are “Misleaders”

Misleaders of the Union of Teachers (UT) and a local RapCity group… focused the blame solely on (school authorities) and ignored the contradictions within capitalism that cause schools to fail the working class. But COS was there to offer our internationalist analysis. We distributed The Clash and had good discussions with teachers… A staple of articles in The Clash is the dismissal of other progressives, and liberals (taken to mean those of a center or center-left ilk), misguided and reformist as
they are in their orientation and objectives. Progressives are criticized for being blind to
the real agenda of the ruling classes. They do not realize that bosses are trying to
“discipline the working class and consolidate U.S. rulers’ top dog superpower status,” or
to secure “centralized ideological control and heightened patriotism.” This extends to
rather aggressive denunciations of “Trots” (Trotskyites) and other activist groups with a
socialist or social democratic orientation.\textsuperscript{180} All those who protest, but fail to see in every
event or issue the fundamental contradictions of capitalism and the need for a violent
mass revolution, are misleaders. They are to be tolerated at best, but one must be as
vigilant of them as one is of bosses, superpowers, and other evil agents of evil capitalism.
As they say elsewhere, “scratch a liberal and you'll uncover an imperialist butcher.”
However, as we saw above about self-criticism, this extreme criticism and suspicion of
all those not wedded to their own conception of class-analysis is not without doubts and
uncertainties—about possibilities of mobilization, whether workers might be right and
communism wrong (an impossible contradiction), about their own capacity to change and
convince people—for the COS.

Critique of reform agendas and their proponents is couched in the context of the
COS doing work in such protests and winning teachers and parents to their views. The
article turns to a study group of the COS discussing the struggle a few days later. A
member pointed out the limits of reform and how “the bosses” ensure all gains are
temporary. The struggle against closure of schools, the main subject of this news article,
is identified with all struggles against capitalism. The article becomes more self-
conscious at this point. It externalizes hesitation or doubt about communism (the idea) to

\textsuperscript{180} Leon Trotsky is reviled by the group for expressing dissent against the Stalinist regime, and is branded a
revisionist. His contemporary followers in the U.S.—“Trots”—are disdained.
workers (the agent). However, there can never be more than a mere hint of frustration with workers. Workers, after all, are the chosen agent of revolution, and need only be convinced.

In our study group we have friends who fear alienating students by talking about capitalism and communism. There are workers who hold back from the mass movement because they think workers are “out for themselves.” Through friendly struggle, we’ve made progress in convincing some of these workers to get involved in the mass movement, raise internationalist ideas, and expand COS’s base.

Note how in this moment friends and students from the study group turn into hesitant workers, who are in turn convinced through friendly struggle. Friends return as workers, convinced to get involved in COS’s struggle. This is consonant with the group’s line on the purpose and meaning of creating friendships, and what most friendships are for the individual flesh and blood members of the COS. The goal is to “struggle” with friends (debate communism with them), “win” them (over to the COS ideology), and make them join the worldwide fight led by the only entity chosen (by itself) to organize, lead and win it.\(^{181}\)

The point about workers merits further discussion. Most members of the COS came from relatively comfortable middle class milieus, something that was true in general of the student radicals and other alienated counterculturalists of the 1960s. The enduring frustration that many movement formations encountered was either a lack of attention to worker’s issues, or the inability to engage with them and draw them into an effective alliance. This is something the COS regularly argued for in the various student activist forums it was a part of during the 1960s and early 1970s. However, the COS’s own success in engaging the workers was patchy at best. The barrier between disaffected

\(^{181}\) Recall the discussion of the COS’s view on friendship and base building in chapter 3.
middle class youth and embattled workers generally proved difficult to overcome. Workers have perennially frustrated the COS, refusing to see the light. A similar dynamic obtained in relations with the African American community, another important constituency of the oppressed in the United States (who should have realized that they are workers too). The COS alienated many members and potential recruits with its analysis of “black resistance” as a form of nationalism not consonant with class struggle.

Part of the resolution of this issue lies in redefining the category of the worker. Those who do not own any business are workers. While this is not so far from the Marxian definition in terms of one’s relationship to the means of production, that formulation was over half a century old when the COS reconstituted itself. More importantly, this conception is intellectually an unsatisfying response to the era of post-industrial, financialized neoliberal capitalism that has emerged since the 1970s. The emergence of financialization and neoliberalism as the dominant form of capitalist organization in the post-industrial era (Amin 1994; Foster 2007; Kalka 2009; Lemke 2001; Martin 2002; Miller and Rose 1990; Rose 1996; Tribe 1981) has not met with an evolution in the discourse of the COS. Remaining with a self-satisfied organization of the world into workers, bosses, racists, fascists, impressed with the analytic category of superexploitation, and wedded to a historical teleology of global war, it proved impossible to engage COS members in a nuanced discussion about the new era of capitalism that emerged with Ronald Reagan. It must be noted, however, that the issue of defining and also redefining Marx’s idea of class remains a debated problem (see Wright 1989 for just one instance of this ongoing debate). Let us return to the article.

(5) The only solution, is an internationalist revolution led by the COS; the COS is making progress, growing the COS is the answer.
Over the past two weeks, the schools struggle has definitely sharpened. Our work within the reform movement gives COS the potential to grow and provide internationalist leadership to the thousands of workers fighting back. It won’t be easy, because the union bosses and community groups are competing for the minds of the working class. But if the group keeps fighting, building relationships, and getting The Clash to those around us, we can realize that potential. We are on our way.

Struggles everywhere are always certainly “sharpening” (another favorite COS word). Ongoing struggles will benefit from a true leadership, which the COS is willing and able to provide. There is a struggle for power with union bosses and community groups who are reformist misleaders dulling the minds of people instead of sharpening them. Getting The Clash in the hands of people will be the catalyst of the potential to be realized. The only way forward is to grow the COS, the answer to all troubles that ail people under capitalism. A hopeful note is sounded about the journey. The future gives hope, and belongs to the COS.

**Premonitions of Apocalypse**

The oscillation between being tacit about one’s ideology to avoid surveillance and persecution, or being ostentatious and conspicuous to gain attention and distinguish oneself from others and win adherents to the vision moves from the COS towards the wider world. The revelatory nature of class-analysis pierces through the capitalist illusion to reveal the truth. It also then provides a prophesy of what will happen in the future.

Since this prophesy is one of an apocalyptic disaster (one which will precede utopia, to be sure), global events rapidly get amplified into so many pieces of evidence confirming the teleology and accuracy of the analysis. To underscore their suspicions, connect them to each other. To highlight their suspicions, connect them to each other, and inflate the implications of current news towards the coming global war, the argumentation sequence goes something like the following. X is being blamed, but Y is the one really responsible
(Y being the ruling class, the bosses, or capitalism); A is being presented as the issue, but B is what is really going on (B being creeping fascism, struggle over oil, or inter-imperialist rivalry). Then claiming to reveal the truth, the collective authors make remarkable leaps towards inevitable apocalypse, World War III. Take for instance the following from an article about maneuverings between inter-imperialist rivals over Asia:

This account *fostered the growing possibility* of a third world war, *possibly nuclear*... An intensifying arms race... stems from growing competition among imperialists for global market share amid limited resources, especially energy. Capitalists, organized as nation states, need to threaten their rival exploiters with the *deadliest* military force possible... *the inevitable day* when their jockeying for profit sources—like oil from the Middle East—explodes into global armed conflict (emphasis added).

From an account ‘fostering a possibility,’ within a few lines we have come to the *inevitability* of the catastrophic (nuclear) third world war, a global armed conflict. This is the moment that the COS waits for, when the whole world will be ready for a revolutionary upheaval led by the COS. That the war, the gratuitously violent moment, is what they predict, while being rather unclear on how the COS will lead the ensuing revolution, again makes one wonder what exactly it is they wait for in the face of the decline of revolutionary impulse all over the world (at least of the internationalist kind that they would prefer). My perception about the distance between their estimation and objective reality caused me to wonder, what if the moment came too soon? Would the COS be ready to take charge of the apocalyptic moment they are prophesying, turn it into the utopia they propagate? Of course, they thought beyond their own lifetimes, and I could not. I was unable to visualize the world situation of capitalism as they did. Further, could it be that the COS fears this apocalypse because its actual emergence would mean the end of hope and the beginning of embrace, and so they proclaim their hope for it
while at the same time deferring it (and the ensuing utopia) into the future? Is this what leads Stella to withdraw in the present, while sustaining herself on the future?

What about the present? There is yet another aspect to the ambivalence noted above about how to present oneself in the social world, and it has little to do with surveillance or recognition; it pertains more to the tainted nature of the world itself. Once the whole system is identified as evil, every phenomenon, event, process, object or structure becomes smeared. An eternal vigilance is required to see through the apparently lucid haze of capitalism’s operation, to find the reality underneath and bring it to attention. Such a vigilance is exemplified by Red Teacher in his letter to The Clash. It demonstrates in rather stark terms the alert distrust which informs members’ outlook towards the settings of their work (which are inevitably, capitalist and therefore racist, sexist, fascist and geared towards the persecution of COS members) in this particular instance, and towards the social world in general.

Titled “Rulers are Real Child Abusers,” this letter is reproduced in full below, to show its creeping sense of persecution, its stark leap from suspicion, to verbalization and confirmation, culminating in a counteraccusation of that which is only hinted at in the beginning (all emphasis and comments in brackets added).

**Rulers are the Real Child Abusers**

I recently attended a mandatory meeting establishing (new) requirements for teachers regarding the reporting of suspected child abuse. A key part of the presentation was the idea that “the authorities” would rather see over-reporting of non-child abuse cases as opposed to under-reporting of actual child abuse cases. *Now, the ruling class certainly doesn’t care about child abuse.* Cutting food stamps, intensifying racism, denying disability benefits, and using drone strikes to kill children are legal and beyond reproach.

It is now illegal for a teacher to not report suspected child abuse [*this is a curious sentence, why is it set up in this way?*]. In other words, they can
now claim that you were “negligent” in not bringing to your supervisor’s attention that you “suspect” something is amiss, even if you never witnessed the supposed suspicious behavior.

*What, then, is going on?* There are several reasons for this more overt approach:

Since teachers are about the welfare of the students, the ruling class needs teachers to convince students that the “authorities” (child welfare agencies, district attorneys’ offices, police departments) are “on their side” and are dedicated to helping people.

The ruling class needs to convince teachers that poor student outcomes are, at the very least, the fault of the students and their parents.

The ruling class wants to use teachers *in the same way the Nazis did*: get them to encourage their students to *rat on their parents’ (or anyone else’s) left-wing and internationalist politics.*

Using child abuse as the opener is a way to suck teachers into this kind of mind set. [Connecting the outrage of child abuse with the promotion of a fascist outlook towards those who come into contact with children—all children are at risk; they are at risk from their parents, and from their teachers].

The *new rules make it even easier for school boards to find that certain “rebellious” teachers should be fired while claiming that their removal has nothing to do with politics* but only occurred because the teacher “condoned” child abuse activity.

The above applies to California. I don’t know what is happening in other states but it’s probably not all that different. We need to be aware of these changes and to point out their very dangerous implications as well as to show how deceptive the ruling class is by hiding its methods behind doing something to help children.

Red Teacher

This is a remarkable letter. An imaginative leap brings welfare of children into a relationship with the persecution of those who hold radical ideas. The agenda of “‘the authorities’” is not to protect children, in fact as we all (members of the COS) know that “the ruling class certainly doesn’t care” about them. Rather, they have contrived a pretext to expose and condemn revolutionaries. This new administrative requirement is less about the welfare of children and more about teachers, and specifically about “‘rebellious’ teachers.” The ruling class is equated with fascists in the process, the great
historical enemy. It is seeking to turn teachers into agents of fascism, and through them, children into rats who will “sniff out” “their parents’ (or anyone else’s) left-wing and internationalist politics.” In short order, this reporting requirement has become a society-wide hunt for hidden radicals.

The directive issued from the educational authority seems quite general. There is a change in certain reporting requirements and a meeting is called to convey this to all employees affected by this change. It could be argued that the requirements are excessive and onerous (“suspected child abuse”), putting a burden of vigilance on teachers they might struggle to shoulder at all times. Nevertheless, it is striking how a hint of a suspicion sparks a shrill counteraccusation of child abuse, leveled by Red Teacher at the ruling class. The sense that child abuse is a smokescreen for weeding out “left-wing and internationalist” parents and teachers or anyone else is extraordinary. In a mimetic reversal, the teacher and the COS turn on their opponent (an institutional authority of capitalism) and impute to it a grotesque horror, convicting it of that which they fear being accused of.\(^\text{182}\)

In Michael Taussig’s exploration of mimesis and alterity in the context of unequal encounters across cultural difference, the mimetic moment is based on attributing a certain savagery to the colonized, and returning in kind that which one imagines the opponent to be capable of (1998:Chapter 5). Something similar happens here. Red

\(^{182}\) Harkening back to the Communist Manifesto, recall the attack on communists as opponents of the bourgeois family:

Abolition [Aufhebung] of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists… Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead guilty… But you Communists would introduce community of women, screams the bourgeoisie in chorus…
Teacher imagines that the ruling class directive to report child abuse is a smokescreen to get him and other radicals. Inferring from this an impending accusation of being implicated in child abuse, an angry counter-allegation ensues. Given the responsibility for seeking out any hint of child molestation, Red Teacher dramatically expands the scope and intent of this new responsibility placed on him by capitalist, racist, fascist bosses. Skeptical of why they would suddenly concern themselves with the welfare of children, he turns around and suspects them, in fact convicts them, of being the real child abusers. Not content with this reversal, he further interprets this policy as a smokescreen for the real agenda: the continuation of a battle between fascists and communists. Children are a tool to be used for the suppression of radicals, leftists, communists. Also notable is the reference to children “ratting on” their parents’ left wing and internationalist politics. Parents of a left-wing or internationalist bent are not immune to betrayal, even from their own children who might be induced to rat on them, expose them to the capitalist state. Children will rat on their parents and teachers, because in this system, they are growing up to be fascists in any case. Under capitalism, no one is safe from anyone else.

Such haunted foreboding, coiled up and sprung at the slighted hint of an imagined provocation, is not uncommon in articles published in The Clash. It orients members to an angry distrust of their lifeworld. It is a short step from when such all-embracing suspicion turns in on the self. If the malady is capitalism itself, surely they must also be ill. And they identify the exact nature of their disorder: “The bosses’ disease—individualism—is an ever present enemy… inside COS and inside each worker.” The menace of pollution is diffused throughout the social and individual body.
“I’m so bourgeois”—creeping doubts about the enemy within

At a meeting, we were discussing a book extract about inherited abilities vs. learned behaviors. The chapter was from a book that argued for the plasticity of the brain. It described how learned behaviors are what really define the individual, and they can change over time, and in turn change the brain. This implied that none of us was born with tendencies that inexorably manifest themselves in life. The implication, I imagine, was that capitalist greed and acquisitiveness were not inborn, and everyone could learn to be an internationalist. I was a little surprised, early in my association with the club, to be reading from a mass-market paperback, and not a document produced by the COS itself, or anything from their better-known Marxist ancestors. In fact, other than one discussion over the Communist Manifesto, we never really read anything from the Marxist canon.183

We had finished discussing the book chapter, and Keith made some comments about a rather famous drummer he knew, how his learned potential was eventually limited by the demands of the capitalist masters he served in the music industry. His creative control over the music was reduced. Keith’s expressions rarely changed from a genial smile. This was one of the rare times he became emotional while talking, feeling perhaps identifying with a fellow musician and feeling the degradation of a man’s creative potential.

Stella rose to clear some plates and I went into the kitchen with her and washed them. We returned and sat down, and I noticed Stella had very pretty earrings on. I complimented her, and she was pleased enough to start telling the story of how she got them. At one point the COS had turned this into a directive. All study groups were told that there was no need to use original Marxist texts for the induction, orientation and training of new members. The COS’s own documents were deemed good enough (the decision was quietly reversed some time later).
them. Animated, she described how she saw another woman at the supermarket wearing them. Attracted to the earrings, she approached her and asked for directions to where she could find a pair for herself. After getting unclear directions, Stella got to one mall but could not find the earrings.

She paused here, shoulders sagging a little. Stella let out a deflated breath and said, “I’m so bourgeois,” in the tone of a mild epiphany mixed with an apology to no one in particular. The pause and confession preceded Stella telling us that she went to two more malls, driving around for over 2 hours before she finally found them in one of the stores in the area the woman had told her to look. The commodity had piqued her desire, and the pleasurable recounting of the story of the search turned midway into a realization of the power her fetish for nice earrings had over her. She was not deflated for long, and finished the story of the earrings with the smile back on her face.

Recently Stella recounted to me on the phone how she went to Target to get herself a pair of gloves, and ended up buying another pair of mittens as well. “I hate capitalism, you know, but every once in a while, you have to breathe, you have to be able to breathe!” Something made her feel stifled all the time, perhaps this learned hatred of capitalism and the problem of living in capitalism with this hatred. I imagined life must be filled with such moments for an anti-capitalist middle class person who must resist the desire for commodities and consumption but was born and raised and living in the U.S.

The inability “to breathe,” stifled as she was by a need to toe the line, to remain perennially vigilant against the creeping menace of capitalism all around her. The sense that she could only live if she did not breathe, that her praxis would be tainted if she breathed, was logically always a possibility for every committed COS member. This
awareness of being integral to capitalism, of being actors within this system, was irrepressible for anything other than a short length of time, no matter how often denied and no matter how detested, and no matter how many times it was fought over. Spoken or unspoken, it was bound to surface again and again. I hate capitalism, but I have to be able to breathe, to partake of the life that I live. It is impossible, from this position, to completely “other” capitalism. One can hold one’s breath only for so long, and here othering would only be possible if one could stop breathing forever. Which, in a sense, is what Stella and others wish for when they predict the inevitable revolution and COS’s final victory, but not in their lifetimes.

**Victor’s heresy**

Victor had said once, and then repeated with greater bravery two times over the next year, “life is pretty good under capitalism.” The third time, the meeting fell silent. This was as close to heresy as he could have gotten without committing heresy, which is why it took bravery. Of course, he qualified it with many secondary clauses to preempt accusations of heresy. “Life is pretty good under capitalism,” said Victor:

- which makes it difficult to remain critical and vigilant sometimes
- which makes it difficult to broach global revolution with people at work
- which makes it difficult to distribute or discuss The Clash
- which makes it difficult…

In short, then, Capitalism made life difficult for Victor, by making life “pretty good.” Hesitating, in stilted sentences, he outlined the broader difficulties of trying to mobilize for revolution in his middle class milieu. In the world as it existed for well to do members of the quasi-religious, broad based progressive association in Victor’s neighborhood, the stark reality of the evil of capitalism was not so apparent, no matter
how clear it was to him. That struggles around the world were evidence of global conflict and the imminent fall of capitalism also seemed tenuous. That a single group would lead the whole world to an internationalist revolution seemed absurd to even suggest.

This was a pregnant moment. Victor’s words meant that reality punctured through the discourse within the club meeting in the living room inside the home of a middle class school nurse living on a pension provided to her by the capitalist system. This was unbearable and rather than deflecting evil outside, as the club usually could, Stella lashed out at Victor. There could be no closing of ranks in the face of this internal dissent, no easily forgotten turning away from an ignorant outsider.\(^{184}\)

She retorted, “we all have questions,” but Victor needed to explain his own actions, if not his commitment. Why is he not struggling harder with his friends, family and professional colleagues? Why is he not trying to bring internationalist ideas more forcefully to the members of the progressive, quasi-religious society of which he is a member? Why did his wife not attend the last May Day rally? Why has he not been able to improve his circulation of The Clash in all the social settings of his life?

\(^{184}\) In this reaction to internal dissent, and in their reaction to outsiders (bosses, liberal misleaders, and so on), the COS demonstrates elements also identified in the Stalinist regime as concerned the party. For the COS, it is always a binary, between true revolutionaries (themselves) and all others. For instance, as Lefort describes (1999:137) some features of Bolshevism:

- the strict separation between members of the party and all those, even sympathizers, outside it; the claim to circumscribe within the boundaries of the organization access to the truth of revolutionary doctrine; the resulting certainty of an alternative that left no other choice but to join the army of the proletariat or be categorized as an opportunist, petit bourgeois, or even traitor; the idealization of the party…

Lefort makes a crucial distinction that I think is relevant here as well, between the revolution and the Party. It goes some way to explain why, in trying to sustain the life force of the group, the COS reveres Stalin. It is uncertain whether Stalin can be associated with the revolution as much as he can be with the Party and with the “defense of the revolution,” the latter a point made often by COS members. The COS speaks of revolution, but do they really want to encounter it?
For over 45 years, Victor had remained a committed member of COS. He attended the meetings, he participated actively, and often brought fresh bread or croissants from a local bakery near his house. This commitment was based on a historic acknowledgment of the role communists played in the fight against Fascists in Hungary, where he was originally from, and Europe at large in the middle of the 20th century. His own parents might have been exterminated were it not for the victory of the allied powers in the Second World War. Also, his relationship with his wife was forged in a moment of struggle, holding hands and not letting go at a demonstration while being pushed back by the police. She is not, and to my knowledge has never been, a member of the COS.

Victor’s commitment was a habit. But if commitment also meant a daily, passionate search for people to convert to the COS, this was not present, much to Stella’s consternation. Enunciating that it is difficult to square what he knows (capitalism is evil and destroys the working class as it creates the world in its own image) with the comforts his life has been afforded in the U.S. was brave for Victor to do. Of course he could go no further. The pressure wrought by this admission of his inability to square his beliefs with his existence was enough to threaten every committed member of the COS in a total, existential way. While Stella spoke for herself, attacking Victor lest he continue speaking in this vein and the reality become too real, she also served the reading club members and the COS with this preemptive attack before he went further in drawing out the logical implications of what he had started. Victor eventually had to turn this back on to himself, qualifying the epiphany by turning it into an admission. He had to make it purely personal, and re-assimilate his doubts about the COS and communism as his own flaws: flaws in his mobilization work, and his subjectivity. That the evil outside and all around
was also the setting for a comfortable life did not, could not, *must not* be allowed to impugn Internationalism and the COS. The COS was above reproach. We returned to reading *The Clash*, the instigator of the revolutionary reading community that will spark the fire of global revolution.

Obama is described as a fascist in *The Clash* (and Stella called him that in my very first phone conversation with her). Canela sensed creeping fascism in a person we briefly met at a church. The evidence? The man insisted it be recognized that the Judeo-Christian tradition was foundational to the creation of this country. This was enough for Canela to be convinced; this was the proof that the man was a proto fascist. As with the child-abusing rulers above, the mechanism of finding proof of their suspicions is curious. It begins with a feeling that something is wrong, something is hidden, and then an event or a person confirms the inchoate feeling without clarifying what exactly it was that was wrong (so it must be capitalism). Unlikely connections function as “proof;” sometimes an exaggerated leap is presented as self evident, the assertion of self evidence being the very connection that is being made by the article.

*The Clash* is filled with phraseology such as this:

- “seamless web of legal fascism”
- “secret evidence, secret courts, state secrets, massive surveillance”
- “Neo-Nazi Drones”

which evokes a creeping sense of evil conspiring against the COS and society in general. They recall the historic enemy, fascism, and face the enduring one, capitalism. The lines between the two blur, capitalism being only another form of fascism. Events chosen for reporting, no matter what the specific content, show that the evil is fascism, and the other, pervasive enemy, capitalism. And their mutual relation.
One of the moments recalled often and with great affection and pleasure by group members is when COS disrupted a KKK public demonstration and had hand-to-hand battles with them. This recollection was significant because it invoked an absent enemy, recalling the great defense of western democracy against Fascists by USSR in World War II. While it could be debated whether the KKK stands comparison with the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany, it ticked enough boxes for the COS to fulfill its given role as a fascist entity. Fascism is important historically. The losses of the USSR in World War II are not well known and understood in the U.S. Perhaps this revelation, to which fascism is integral, could have the power to legitimate Stalinism in the present.

While an amorphous evil is named (fascism!), it remains unrecognizable. COS members are dying to fight the great historic enemy, but the fascist refuses to appear; or worse, refuses to take them on. Like a lost object, the lost enemy refuses to return, to engage so that one may see oneself in another that one can recognize. Yet they repeatedly call out to the lost enemy and identify it where they can. This identification is ephemeral, never giving them a fixed target to fill the signifier “fascism” with. The conflation with capitalism, which has been done theoretically as well (Dutt 1935, 1974), allows this persistent identification of fascism in the U.S., but it poses another problem for these radicals who are citizens of the U.S. Their ideology alienates them from their daily lives. Their conviction is fed everyday by their own social world. Unfortunately, not only does this world not seem to care for their diagnosis and cure anymore, their lives and selves are permeated by it. Much more than the vacillation between being secretive or conspicuous it is this self-doubt, the enemy within leaves the most committed member suspended.
The Enemy Within: Suspicion of the Bourgeois (self)

With fascism, the problem is of identifying an evil and fighting it; it is absent. With capitalism, it is a different problem: the evil is everywhere and hence nowhere, it is ordinary and all too familiar, cue Stella’s sudden urges to shop, to breathe. In a sense that creates even greater threat, the enemy is within. The capitalist ordinary, the American middle class social nexus that produces the reflection of their normal recognizable selves to themselves, is at the same time the social nexus that they seek to destroy. The process of naming (the evil is capitalism) does not exhaust the process of symbolization, it does not create enough distance to what is named such that it might bring peace. Naming to create the difference between oneself and the other fails (and is bound to fail per this argument). The menace is the very backdrop of their lives, everywhere and nowhere, and is in this sense unnamable.

Reading the anti-racism pamphlet distributed by the COS again, the first half of the line quoted at the start of this chapter (“be careful when trusting the bourgeois anthropologists”) is striking in its overweening sense of distrust. Be careful, in your examination of history, in your encounter with information. Do not trust easily anyone tinged with the stain of the bourgeois (and practically everyone is tinged with that stain). It articulates a suspicion that seems unfounded. And then, as it slowly dawned on me that such a suspicion is actually part of the reflex reaction to all things capitalist, that it is the starting orientation to all events, phenomena and people, then the seemingly unfounded note of caution is not really incongruous anymore. The suspicion of bourgeois capitalism, of the U.S. government and its machinations is compounded by the knowledge that

185 Cf. Siegel 2006, Chapter 5, P.191
Russia and China are no better; leftists are contaminated by revisionism. Liberals mislead because they do not know the truth and are crippled by reformism: the list goes on, everyone is evil. A generalized suspicion of everything in a fallen world is endemic and inherent to life as a member of COS.

Worse still, raised in the U.S., they are aware of being ill themselves. “The bosses’ disease—individualism—is an ever-present enemy… inside COS and inside each worker… We struggle daily to rid ourselves of the influence of capitalist ideas.” Individualism is a disease, afflicting each American COS member of the evil system that is capitalism. No one is immune from it; everyone is infected and must fight long and hard to cure themselves and others of this disease. They must struggle daily, and they can never be sure they are cured. The menace of pollution is all around them, and it is all they can do to remain vigilant and try to protect their purity as true revolutionaries. But what about the impurity within?

Through The Clash, COS purports to reveal the ideological nature of the common man’s social reality. The periodical is written as much, if not mostly, for its internal audience as it is for any potential public readership. Given that ideology is invisible to those whose consciousness is submerged within it, this realization is an intellectual

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186 In fact, they are often considered the biggest threat: “Liberal politicians and ideologues were then, and remain today, the primary external threat to workers, pro-working class students, and revolutionary communists. The liberal JFK started the Vietnam War. The liberal LBJ prolonged it. Like Bush today, the Republican Nixon justifiably emerged as the politician everyone loved to hate, but the liberal Democrat, “Clean Gene” McCarthy, administered the main body blow to the anti-war movement by successfully channeling student militancy into a dead-end electoral trap. Democratic Party politicians and the bosses for whom they front are setting a similar trap for millions opposed to today's oil war in Iraq. One of PLP's major tasks will be to win large numbers of the war's opponents to break away from Clinton, Obama, Edwards, et al. No capitalist politician is for peace: scratch a liberal and you'll uncover an imperialist butcher.”
apprehension that serves to create a critical distance and even alienation from the capitalist system for members.

There are three discernible forms of self-other reference. At times the COS text is self-critical, at times it engages in boasts about achievements, and at other times (usually in conclusions of articles) exhorts others to join the group and participate in the coming utopia in an absurd display of positivity and hope. The exclamation point after this concluding statement, “Join Us!” would frequently unsettle me, producing a physical reaction of exasperation.

It is akin to a person engaged in a soliloquy. In the periodical articles (also in progress reports) authors talk about themselves, being critical and self evaluative, creating a sense that the “I” is reflexive. In the progress reports there is often a criticism of one’s “subjectivity,” putting personal satisfaction, feelings and preferences over the objective needs of the COS. With a promise to continue the struggle with their subjectivity and, members then assert and often exaggerate their achievements, talking to the other but not looking at the other, to avoid any doubt. Finally, they turn to you, seeking to absorb you into them. In most articles, the common man, “interested teacher,” “worker,” “student,” becomes “comrade.”

The evil of capitalism allows for an all out war on the given world in which everything is impure, is polluted. The COS dogma reflects the knowledge that everything is permeated by capitalism in one’s own life and this breeds suspicion. Given that everything about capitalism is evil, it stands to logic that everything one comes into contact with is tainted. This can be an act of daily consumption or an encounter with the institutional authorities of public education in “bourgeois democracy” (as we saw with
Red Teacher above). Add to this the fact that one is now in a lifelong battle to exterminate that which is the very foundation of one’s own upbringing—a capitalist ideology and system, and its attendant institutions such as school, the bourgeois family, state, society and culture—and it seems almost inevitable that one’s suspicions would implicate oneself. This process comes before and goes beyond intellectually apprehending what is wrong with one’s daily life under capitalism. It nags like a blind spot, an invisible image always at the corner of one’s eye, always just out of the periphery of one’s vision and imagination.

Everything one does is tainted, one knows this. What one knows, one (tries but) can (not) rationalize. Everything is tainted, how could it not be? Given this, betrayal is endemic, even by oneself. One could feel this, without expression, without articulation in words. Did one betray one’s internationalist principles today: on the road, at office, at the grocery store, at the gas station, while watching cable TV, while talking to one’s partner or children? The feeling haunts, tingeing every action, a pressure that seeks to find expression, but cannot.

One does not know, and one cannot think the question. The answer would be yes. How could it be otherwise? However, one cannot think the question, because it is simply an inchoate feeling that nags, now that one has become a revolutionary, whether one is betraying the coming revolution as they live a normal, everyday, capitalist life. Once the revolutionary possibility fades, the committed radical is caught in a perennial oscillation between what one knows (that this world is brutal, exploitative and unjust) and what one feels (a betrayal of commitment, and emotions tainted by what surrounds one). And one can only shout louder to drown out the inchoate noise of such doubts.
Conclusion

In the 1960s, at the height of the student protests against the war in Vietnam and civil rights struggles at home, many radicalized individuals and groups believed the fall of capitalism was imminent. While the U.S. state did appear rattled by the threats from abroad and the struggles at home, this belief and expectation was disabused little by little, with the brutal suppression of the Black Panthers at home, the bombings in Vietnam and eventual negotiations between the National Liberation Front (NLF) of Vietnam and the U.S. government, and the belief, generated by the successful black struggle for civil rights, that the system could correct itself. Capitalism had accommodated or diffused threats to itself. Radicals were left disoriented, searching for coherence when reality did not conform to their analysis or expectations.

The COS, formed to fight revisionism in the internationalist movement and reassert the primacy of world revolution, underwent changes in strategy as it evolved in relation to the political situation and in counter-position to other collectives. They decided that nationalism was a negative factor in building international working class solidarity, decided that black struggles in the U.S. were a form of nationalism, and denounced them. Subsequently, they denounced the NLF for negotiating with the U.S. and receiving material assistance from USSR, the latter having already committed the sin of revisionism in 1956. It is moot whether these were correct analyses or successful strategies; one may note in passing that after the peak of the student movement, the COS’ numbers dwindled steadily. Many members were expelled or left, and new recruits from the working class or from the student community could not replace the departed.
In any event, reality refused to conform to COS analysis and predictions. While it might have triggered revisions in thinking, an attempt at a fresh analysis, or at least a change in practical strategies of mobilization and action (and these things did occur to some extent; for instance, the failure to build a base in the working class was acknowledged), the result was an intensified hatred of capitalism and further insularity from those who were thought to have corrupted Marxism with revisionist, nationalist, sectarian ideas. In the search for purity, the COS “doubled down” on its analysis by reasserting its validity, and becoming more intransigent. The focus turned inwards, on enforcing greater discipline, demanding enhanced self-criticism, setting harsher targets for sale of The Clash, and calling for increased aggression and effort in recruiting new members.

Their initial success in the student movement, the groundswell of opposition to the Vietnam War, the increasing numbers in their membership; all this must have combined to produce a euphoric anticipation of victory in the diehard COS member committed to revolution. Faced with the phenomenon of Black Nationalism, they made an analysis which concluded that a true internationalist revolution could not commence from an accommodation of nationalist forms of identification. This was a concrete analysis in response to a concrete situation. That they stood apart from other communists in this war of ideas only seemed to confirm their view. There could be no retreat from this position. Members left, others were expelled, but the COS itself would persist on the basis of their analysis.\footnote{It was at this time that the recounting of the failures of others was analyzed and formalized in COS documents: the nationalism of the militant black formations, the liberalism of the civil rights struggle, the mistake of China in supporting a negotiated peace in Vietnam, the huge mistake of NLF in going along} They had consolidated their position. But it also meant that now
they were in a position that could not be disconfirmed by experience. The world stopped offering confirmation of their vision, and this led them to turn inwards and reaffirm that what they believed was correct. And once they made this turn, they were caught. Once they reached this analysis, actual events could only confirm it. The Black Panthers would fail because they were nationalists, driven by a racial identity. The Vietnamese people had made an incorrect analysis, and the negotiated peace would only benefit the national elites of Vietnam, USSR, China, and the United States. Vietnam had begun the slide back into capitalism. They were right, and reality was “wrong.” As it was, reality refused to come in line, and the seemingly imminent revolution seemed indefinitely delayed.

Death to capitalism! COS members are anti-capitalists in the most total way one could imagine in the U.S. They believe the system must be destroyed, and it must be destroyed everywhere in the world. This is what they believe and work towards; this is the organizing principle of their self-understanding, the ultimate source of meaningfulness for it. Given this, living in the heartland of the most extreme manifestation of capitalism in history, members of COS are faced with an amorphous evil, everyday. They are submerged in consumption patterns and behaviors that signify capitalism, the accidental site of their birth, their fall into language and their self-alienation (Lévi-Strauss 1963c) into social life.

Their alienation emerges from the experience of capitalism. Before their radicalization, certainly during their childhood, they “lived in” capitalism, the social milieu and backdrop to their life. Their families cared for them to whatever extent they
could, and provided the context within which they came to see the world. Even if their fathers or mothers caused them pain, and even if they grew up with a sense of discontent, it was not until their indoctrination into COS that they came to see the whole system, *their world*, as evil. Before then, one assumes that their discontent did not have their worldview as its object; rather, it was seeking an object. It was not until they received the revelations of dialectical materialism that they had an answer to their discontent, an explanation that helped make sense of their alienation from their social milieu.

The process of naming that which must be destroyed—capitalism, fascism, fascist-capitalism—is apparently successful. COS members achieved this critical insight when they realize truth about the system they live in, how this system exploits the working class and divides it. Yet, this naming, this othering, does not exhaust the process, although it does unify some dispersed voices (sense of discontent, witnessing of injustice, frustration with relationships, economic difficulties). Once they had the answer (“it is capitalism”), everything they were familiar with became suspect. No singular other emerges, because the other is within oneself, and the other is around oneself everyday. The critique of consumerism, for instance, only brings into stark relief that each visit to the supermarket shelves, to the stores in the mall, to the movie theater, is an act that confounds the process of othering. It bears down on the individual, a whisper that one’s every action is a betrayal of one’s real self, the one that fights for expression in the world by creating a world in its image. Having developed the coordinates that account for an external reality, COS members might be assailed by a nagging doubt much closer to home. A doubt about themselves.
Everyone is carrying the disease of capitalism inside them, including members of COS even though they are armed with the antidote. The disease is not going to be cured, fully excised from the body, not until the worldwide revolution has come. In every act of daily life, they are compelled to act as that which they oppose, as capitalist subjects. Some or all of them may have, of course, an intellectual understanding of this fact, but it is not exhausted through this understanding. It is there, an intuition that they are betraying themselves, everyday. So diseased, the COS member can not ever fully trust in his or her own ability to figure oneself, find in the mirror the person they want to see.

Perhaps the group then serves as a bulwark against complete despair, a guarantee that each member is recognized as pure within the group, or accepted with their impurities. The group offers a recognition that the capitalist workplace, the house built on a mortgage offered by the monopoly capitalist banking system, the stranger who rejected the gift of the periodical, the shopkeeper that watches the COS rally and laughs or simply walks back inside, does not.

It is the normal, everyday self which betrays the COS member. But if the normal, everyday self betrays me, who am I? And who is the speaking subject that gives me this premonition? Is it the “true” self, the one seeking a reality that conforms to its nature, the internationalist self that will emerge after worldwide revolution? There remained an enemy within, an impurity that could not be eradicated through insularity. The implication of anti-capitalism for these U.S. citizens is then “an incapacity to figure oneself.” (Siegel 2006: 124) The logical consequence of this inability is a kind of death, the destruction of a basic form of self-recognition. But of course, they are alive.
On one hand, they acknowledge the reality of their daily experience by repeating that they hate it, wishing to unleash an all out war on this pervasive pollution all around and within. On the other hand, Stalinism, much as they glorify it, is spatially, geographically and historically outside of their experience. They have not lived through 1930s Stalinism. The era of actually existing Stalinism was in another country and another time. Life (not the one in which Stella breathes, once in a while, but life as she imagines it) for the COS member then becomes indexed by something that is outside of experience.

Today, they have the misfortune of being born in a capitalist society, the misfortune that this capitalist society has permeated thoroughly even those systems that claimed to be socialist or communist (USSR, China), the misfortune of living through a time when capitalism grows and grows into the global ideology of a unipolar world. Having once found an answer to this misfortune and converted to the religion of the science of dialectical materialism, members of the COS must necessarily betray their internationalist outlook everyday. They conjured the force that would destroy the capitalist system, but it failed. The ordinary has become unbearable and evil, and it remains inexplicable even after the enunciating cure of Marxism-Leninism has been administered. The force conjured to fight that which troubled them failed, and they are condemned, committed to a struggle until death by the evil that permeates their self, and bedeviled by the cure that has turned in on itself, on them, keeping them in its hold. They are haunted by it, clinging to the intangible presence of the good object that is Stalinism.

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188 One might add that this was an attempt to destroy one’s own cultural system and to that extent, was an attempt to conjure something that would destroy oneself. It is no wonder then that COS members of the first generation defer the revolution beyond their lifetimes.
It continues to be outside their experience now, and they keep it so, projecting it into the future, the global revolution that will succeed World War III. Subject to little external impingement due to its permanent deferral, this object can be nurtured endlessly. They keep waiting for a reality that coheres with what they believe now to be their true selves, a post revolutionary utopia where their true personalities can flower and bloom.

A final return to that moment when Keith and Stella were faced with Ena, to their expressions and silence, or silent expressions, when Ena spoke. I noted above that there was a paternal, enlightened indulgence to it. It may be that both of them were indeed confirmed in their analysis, assured that Ena would be free once the global revolution they envisaged had come to pass. They know the problem of racism, and they know the solution: an anti-racist class conflict that finally brings an end to all the inequities and injustice of capitalism.

Their optimism was not shaken, but instead confirmed. Rather, it was shaken and confirmed at the same time. It was the investment in an object that did both of these things, simultaneously and perennially, a cruel optimism. Cruel optimism speaks of the investment of affect and projection of desires into an object that simultaneously empowers and deprives, enables and constrains, gives hope and disabuses it. While this should immediately resonate when thinking about the strangely suspended COS, here I am trying to understand why they did not seem to engage in reality with what they had resolved intellectually. Why did they have nothing to say?

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189 This idea is developed and applied further in chapter 3. Chapter 3 stands on its own as a testament to Stella. Analytically, by delving deeper into one COS member’s life, it also performs as a “case study” of the relation of the COS members in general to their beliefs.
“[A] silent, affectively present but physically displaced interlocutor… the condition of projected possibility… creates a fake present moment of intersubjectivity in which, nonetheless, a performance of address can take place.” (Berlant 2008: 34)

Something remains hidden in spite of the scientific Truth of dialectical materialism. Marxism makes everything clear, allowing Stella and Keith to remain complacent about the existence of racism,\(^{190}\) because they have the knowledge, the real truth. Yet, it seems to me that they do not believe it, cannot find peace in this complacency. They were not silent when Ena spoke, they were silenced. Was this the fundamental barrier between these revolutionary activists and the masses? Was this failure to engage Ena the same as the rigid position on Black Nationalism? The same as Stella’s failure, literally and figuratively, to go around the corner and cross the street from her house today?\(^ {191}\) The same failure that Stella’s daughter Helen and others who lived in RapCity by design encountered as they sought to create an “intentional community” (as Helen called it) in a city of color? Was this the inability to enact a communion with the other in reality that compelled the revolution to be suspended?\(^ {192}\)

Once the COS decided in the 1960s that nationalism would only lead to a sliding back into capitalism, the die was cast. Slowly but surely, actual events began to only confirm the ascetic, uncompromising position the COS had reached. There could be no piecemeal reform, no complexity of alternative forms of identification. Everyone who was not a capitalist was working class, and the revolution had to be total, global, complete. The black nationalists, the militant, superexploited black youth became this

\(^{190}\) This is not to imply in any way that they are racist. Racism is COS’ main point of attack on capitalism, and members are committed anti-racists.

\(^{191}\) See chapter 1.

\(^{192}\) To be sure, they are not the only ones responsible, the masses of those they fight the anti-racist fight for must also respond.
physically displaced interlocutor that could be addressed even in their absence. In fact, *only* in their absence. The “performance of address” failed when this “physically displaced interlocutor” was a flesh and blood living presence in front of them. It also offers a clue about what happens when a teleological ideology reaches an intractable position in the realm of praxis.

Now, the revolution remains inevitable, but is permanently deferred so that it will not shatter through the phantasmatic space in which COS members continue to hold and nurture the good object—Stalinism—that in turn “holds” them (and Ogden 2004; also see Winnicott 1960; Winnicott 1969), containing their fears of a hostile world by promising emancipation of that world (and in turn of themselves) and alleviating their doubts in daily life.

The revolution, as idea, but also as historical event (1917) is a mythical reservoir of the past that remains productive because it has never been consumed, it has never congealed into an actual revolution in the lifetimes of COS members. It is forever in potency, its “becoming” is never enacted. In the present, this failure of enactment is the failure to go around the corner, across the street, to respond to Ena. In the future, this failure turns into an inevitability of success. But not in our lifetimes. The deferral, or projection of the revolution into the future allows it to remain pure. It can, like Ena, be addressed in its absence.

“I have my writing, my friends, and Internationalism, which I won’t see,” said Stella during the period when she was facing up to the end of her relationship with
Doug. She had something she did not see, something she did not expect to see, something she could have only if it were not seen. This permanent deferral into the future was the condition of possibility for having it, perhaps because the time when it looked like one might have it in reality it had not come to pass, and instead of dying so it could be mourned, the impulse and hope for revolution became weak, attenuated and ultimately spectral. The COS members remained loyal to a revolution, or at least to Stalinism, but many left. Others were driven out to curb internal dissent. Material facts returned in the form of declining membership and reduced sales of The Clash, giving the members a slow and unclear idea that around them, their vision was shrinking, it was dissipating, dying. In a sense, the ideology became zombified, neither alive nor fully deceased, simply persisting to call COS members to duty. They became divided against themselves, living in a system that offered no comfort as they secured their livelihoods and continued to hate it, and living for a Internationalism that dissipated without dying, without passing so it could be mourned. 

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193 See chapter 3.

194 While it is a true that there are others who have been able to mourn this dissipation of their ideology, such as the famous counterculture activist Jerry Rubin, and others who have faced the failure of the revolutionary moment with collective death, as in the sect founded by Jim Jones, it is also true that many socialistic groups from the 1960s continue their attenuated, but nonetheless active existence even today. Hence the cause of this failure to let go and mourn remains an open question. I have suggested one possible interpretation here, through the lens of bewitchment and trauma. Still, one can see that most other groups have found ways of continuing their work with an accommodation to the objective reality and resilience of capitalism to counter-ideologies. Most of them speak of solutions and reforms, and while some continue to be socialists, none seem as oriented to revolution or as gratuitously pro-violence. Perhaps this is part of the key, part of the reason for this continued suspension. The COS’s vision is so total, and so trenchantly predicated on a complete destruction of their Other, real (capitalism) or spectral (Fascism), that they can’t but be frozen, unable to move on, when reality does not conform to their vision. The traumatic moment then is a very real historical phase of events during the 1960s and 1970s: the great upsurge against Capitalism in the U.S. and against imperialism in the third world, and then the great betrayals of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam and China’s acquiescence to the world order as it stood (the USSR, of course, had betrayed revolution already).

Alternatively, the question can be generalized to all the activist groups of the 1960s that opposed capitalism, are unable to give up their orientation, and continue to pursue what they find to be viable (though not as revolutionary) socialist alternatives. Why do they keep on?
“We don’t expect to see the revolution in our lifetime,” Keith almost seemed to affirm at a meeting when a visitor asked how the COS purports to actualize its vision in the world. For them the realization of this “really true” self of theirs is permanently deferred. It must be so because of the petrification of their experience, the pain of great hope and greater disappointment, this denial of the dissipation of objective revolutionary possibilities in the world, and the need for a semblance of peace. This is the tragedy of this wonderful group of people, these hopeful revolutionaries.

Epilogue

“Reach the general public with The Clash”

Countless times in the COS literature, missives, outlines of action, one encounters exhortations for selling or distributing The Clash as an essential, even central element of the concrete strategy to win the working class for revolution. Once, in a group meeting, Stella tried to put me on the spot by asking when I will start my own distribution route for The Clash. I clarified that I am only now building relationships in the neighborhood, and trying to get to know people, so this will have to wait. Nonetheless, I “distributed” The Clash once. The couple running the deli downstairs had become friendly to me, and Stella had encountered them before I started living in the neighborhood, when she was looking for a place to stay for me. I gave Michael a copy of the paper, referring to the white lady (Stella) that had come to talk to him.

A few days after I gave him the paper, I was at the deli, watching the 9/11 memorial on TV with Michael. As the speaker read out the names of the victims, interspersed by small speeches composed by families or political leaders, I asked Michael and his wife Destiny if they have been to the WTC site, and if they memorialize 9/11 in
any way. Destiny shrugged, and told me that it is too much drama, all these activities every year around 9/11. I had heard this from another woman, a stranger, earlier in the day. Michael expounded in greater detail. They had gone to visit once, and were turned off that every one had to pay a $12 fee to visit the memorial. Michael then interpreted his experience in a surprising way. He began to rant about how they do everything for money, even the TV show is boring, they just keep reading out the names as if they mean something, and culminated with this striking statement:

And that’s the thing, America, good country, but capitalist… anyway, you don’t need to worry where I will be. The day revolution breaks out, I’ll be in the street. I’m for the people. Mmhmmm, you don’t need to ask where Michael will be.

I wondered how much reading that newspaper I had left with him had to do with this statement. Perhaps Michael was trying to be socially agreeable, reflecting back to me what he believed to be my outlook. In general, he thought I was naïve and “too nice,” telling me once that this was hindering my fieldwork, because people thought they could take advantage of me. So while I was struck by his talk of revolution, I also knew that Michael was the master of the social platitude. He could talk to all customers at “their level,” be they old ladies, young children or the corner crews, his most regular afternoon customers. He was seeking my level, I thought, presenting to me what he felt were my progressive ideas and outlook.

Yet, it was instructive, this power to speak a language that the periodical gave him. Could others convert to this outlook in similar ways, through regular reading of the newspaper?

At a pool hall in Belleville near the end of my fieldwork, Canela’s brother told me that Canela’s encounter with the COS was humorously serendipitous and triggered
inadvertently by him. We had just moved from a dinner meeting of the COS to the pool hall. As soon as we stepped outside, Canela’s brother said, “man, Canela told me we were coming to meet you, and then I was stuck here, sitting in this meeting with all these people talking about shit…” At the pool hall he told me, “Man, I used to like having something to read in the bathroom, and this paper (The Clash), the Arabs used to have it for free at the store. So I brought it, and Canela started reading it in the bathroom too, that’s how he found out about these people.” Lying in his bathroom, successive copies were discovered by Canela, perhaps also looking to read something. Over time, one imagines, as his brother brought issue after issue into the bathroom, Canela was won over.

Of course, there was a difference between Michael and Canela. From what I knew of him, it was difficult to imagine Michael having any leftist influences in his life. Still, both had, for a moment in Michael’s case and much longer for Canela, spoken the word: Revolution.
Glory

[P]olitical violence would hold the promise of a meaning as it provides an occasion for the composition of thoughts and actions. It is therefore intriguing and fascinating. But by means of these same images, political violence would also seem to raise the threat of an uncertain meaning which carries the threat of death. It is therefore dreadful and terrifying… [T]he violence…appears as a dream of the personal voice written large. It is also the dream that sometimes degenerates into a nightmare. [Meeker 1979:31]

Institutionalized marginality, the liminal state of social death…. [Patterson 1982:46]

An Exchange of Aggression

“Bring that nigger out here man.” Saleem’s voice had become almost impossibly shrill with anger. Haider was not his normal self either, but although louder than usual, he still spoke in his deeper, permanently gruff tone. They walked towards each other for the umpteenth time, mouthing off challenges and threats as they came closer, Saleem the tall and muscular ex-footballer and the stockier Haider, built like a wrestler. They stood, and spoke, and paced. I noticed that every time one of them walked toward the other, he did not walk straight, but instead always at an angle, circling and approaching. Only once, they bumped forearms. This is as close as it came to physical aggression between them during the whole incident. Through all the anger and belligerence, both were aware that escalating the argument beyond the point of words and absolutely minimal physical contact would be dangerous (and even then, this moment where their forearms collided might have overtaken both of them; it was not a rehearsed confrontation, even though both of them adhered to its broad parameters). Perhaps both also saw that it would be ruinous for everyone; there was a certain balance to the business on the street at this point. Disrupting the balance between Haider and Saleem meant disrupting the delicate
equilibrium of the whole network on these two blocks. So they shouted, and threatened, and walked towards each other, each time thrown apart when they got too close. Like magnets with poles aligned, they would repulse back off each other. I was standing outside my apartment building; after a while I walked over to stand outside the store run by Rajinder, a few feet away from the two. People on the street passed by with apprehensive glances; some were curious and trying not to let on their curiosity, especially to Haider and Saleem. All members of Haider and Saleem’s crews were conspicuously out of sight.

Saleem had beaten up Jaquon, a light-skinned young man who had recently begun to work for Haider. The exact details were disputed, but Saleem claimed that Jaquon lifted a part of the supply earmarked for Saleem from their common supplier and made off with it. There was no justification for this, and it seemed a deliberate attempt to provoke Saleem. While it was unclear whether Jaquon acted on his own accord or at the behest of Haider, Saleem decided to take up the affront as he had to, and countered with a beating of Jaquon that, while nowhere near fatal or brutal enough to cause long term injury, was rough by all accounts.

Rajinder, the man who ran the new convenience store on the block and who would often be an important interpreter of events on the street for me, told me that Jaquon had to be hospitalized for a few days. When he mentioned that Haider had categorically refused to go see him, I was surprised. It was never clear if Haider had instigated Jaquon, but once Jaquon had acted, Haider had to get involved. As part of Haider’s crew, Jaquon worked for Haider and was paid by him. Haider was his patron (cf. Lindholm 1982:74-76) and any act against Jaquon put Haider’s honor at stake. So, by not
visiting Jaquon in hospital to show his relation, was Haider foregoing any claims made on him through the assault on Jaquon? Rajinder explained: “ye bahut sensitive hai, hospital nahi gaya kyonki agar yeh Jaquon ko dekhta to paagal ho jata” [he (Haider) is extremely sensitive; he did not go to hospital because if he had seen Jaquon he might have become mad]. Knowing well his own nature and his self-avowed propensity for “madness” brought on by moments that caused excessive emotion, Haider avoided the situation where he might lose the capacity to maintain the conflict at a manageable level.

A restraint operated here in this exchange of violent communication. If Haider had acted directly to provoke Saleem in the first place, or if Saleem had used his superior physicality to full effect with Jaquon, the issue might have escalated out of control. Excessive retaliation against Saleem then would have taken the issue to another level, perhaps even compelling the larger fraternities behind Haider and Saleem to get involved: hence the elaborate dance that began with the first blow (Jaquon’s “theft”) and counter blow (Saleem’s physical retaliation). In one sense, the exchange of stolen goods with violence had already precipitated some parity of exchange, and it was up to the two men—Haider and Saleem—to see whether things should go further. There was little at stake materially in an immediate sense, as both were doing good business and Saleem could make up the losses, while Haider could have someone work in Jaquon’s place while he recuperated (and even if he decided to stop working after this sobering moment, perceiving the risks of violence and incarceration to be too high).  

As it turned out, Jaquon started to work again, but was arrested in short order and imprisoned for five years. His career was not exactly over, but he had surely entered the inevitable cycle of work and imprisonment earlier than he wanted to. No one was under illusions about being arrested, it was almost an expected consequence of “being in a fishbowl,” i.e. being out on the street in the open, subject to any police attack where inevitably some of the “fish” would get snagged in the net. Some, however, were more careful.
But the stakes were high nonetheless for both men and their audience. Neither could leave the issue fallow. For Haider to not make a clear public show of outrage and desire to defend his crew and for Saleem to back away from this moment were not possibilities either could countenance. A showdown was necessary and inevitable, the only question being how the two would maintain their standing in this confrontation and walk away with a sense of parity in respect without the exchange escalating destructively out of control, or whether it would go beyond reason and precipitate further violence. The moment came to pass that evening when they saw each other from across the street, and started walking.

Haider had kept away for a few days after Saleem beat Jaquon, but his presence loomed large. Saleem continued to come to the boulevard from his home 20 miles away, but only intermittently and, prudently, late in the evening. In this way, he could show that he was not averse to the consequences of what had happened, and at the same time avoid open confrontations in the daytime when everyone was out on the street, and in a heightened state of vigilance because “the train”—police cars that periodically drove across the avenue and around the block—might come by. The avenue was made up of about 100 meters of the main street, intersected at six points on either side by capillary streets. Together, this area made up the landscape. The intersections with three streets on one side and two on the other marked or punctuated the area on the avenue where Saleem and Haider and their crews, Misam’s crew of three (over time two, and eventually one), and the independents Otis and Gamal worked. The capillary streets were where some of

than others. Still others, like Haider, as we will see, began to inhabit a universe where jail almost appeared to be an escape, leading them to willfully invite imprisonment.
them lived and had spots for keeping their daily supplies for sale, spots that changed regularly. There were two convenience stores, both run by Indians of South Asian extraction, a day care, a laundromat, a sandwich and ice cream place where most of the men bought their lunch, a corner church that gave out free food on weekends, a nearly defunct barber shop, the waiting area of a bus stop, and a Jamaican restaurant that opened irregularly but often held parties in the backyard (Saleem had tried his hand at managing events at this restaurants, but “got played” when it came time for him to be paid; he had also held one event at this place, but did not make any money because collection of entry fees was poorly organized. In addition, the owner of the restaurant baulked when it came time to pay him and Otis for the clean up work they had done on the roof). Cars constantly drove over this busy street, which ran through RapCity and transitioned towards the semi-suburban township of Sleepytown at the traffic signal in front of us: the traffic signal formed part of invisible line between “crime ridden and violent RapCity,” and “progressive, racially integrated Sleepytown.” The avenue was active as usual this evening, with people getting off buses that came by a little more frequently at this time, or going in and coming out of the convenience stores and the sandwich shop. A car was parked in front of the convenience store next to the bus stop,

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196 This barber shop was sometimes a site for the men giving each other minor trims and “shape ups,” while the owner, a man from Haiti with alcoholic tendencies, sat around. They were moments of surprising tenderness, hyper masculine men carefully poring over a fellow rider’s head with a razorblade in hand. A silence would surround their interaction, one waiting for the approval of the other, and the other quietly pointing to a spot on their head or face where they wanted a line of hair to be sharpened, or a stray hair to be excised with the razor. Like professional barbers, the session would end with the man with the razor applying lotion on their friend’s head and face, dusting off the cut hair, and putting things back in place.

197 These stereotyped notions were not held universally in RapCity. Sleepytown was for the men on the street simply the line one did not cross, the place one did not walk into or loiter in. RapCity for them was “their hood,” their place. On the other hand, residents of Sleepytown often used these two broad brushes to tacitly characterize their own township and contrast it from the people next door.
and a couple of cars were parked along the wall of the bus stop itself. This is where Haider and Saleem converged.

A round of cursing while standing extremely close to each other inaugurated the conversation. They broke off, and a few minutes went by with shouted claims and counter claims while standing a few feet apart. In my estimation, Saleem knew he should “lose it” earlier than Haider by expressing his anger forcefully. His situation was a little weaker on the corner of late, and a couple of crew members had broken off and joined Haider. Add to that the fact they were trying to square off a disputed act of theft and undeniable physical retaliation, and it seemed that Saleem had to affirm his decision to beat up Jaquon by appearing outraged and prepared for further violence. Yet, in the process he probably also conceded the final decision on how this confrontation might go to Haider, who had kept his cool and retained his set of threats to counter Saleem.

Saleem had walked a few feet away again and was walking back and forth in a half circle. Braced and stiff, Haider pointed a finger in his direction, and shouted violent threats of retaliation to Saleem if he were to touch Jaquon again. He masterfully chose his words here, never putting himself directly in the line of Saleem’s threats or possible actions; instead, his repetition of Jaquon’s name allowed for Haider to mix his aggression with a tinge of disdain for Saleem’s threats, which were of course also carefully directed at Jaquon, and not directly at Haider.

The pitch of Saleem’s voice was a mixture of suffocating anger and a physical nervousness or quivering, his body threatening to be exceeded by his emotion. The words were on the edge of disappearing into silence if he shouted with any greater intensity. He finished and walked towards Haider again, and this was the moment when it looked like
something worse might break out than the vitriolic and aggressive exchanges that had so far gone between the two men. This is when they banged bodies, approaching each other sideways and leading with the forearm. Both immediately walked away from each other. There was a magnificent, spectacular aspect to this elaborate dance, both men aggressively hypermasculine in their body language and their bodies. Saleem’s physique was rather more sculpted than Haider’s. Yet, Haider was no less impressive, broad and stocky and clearly afraid of no one.

After the clash of forearms and further exchange of words and stares, they were finally at a standoff. Haider had kept his counsel yet proved completely willing to counter aggression with aggression, and Saleem had not had to verbally concede anything. This was the best Saleem could achieve from the encounter. His early loss of temper and exhaustion of threats was also already coded in the equation of mutual self-respect in hostility between the two men, but lack of parity in crew strength and reputation. Saleem was thought of as cool and charismatic, but also too exuberant and unreliable in business. Like Haider, he was also a “lost one,” someone who had returned from prison, had paid the price of being in the game with his freedom. Yet, Haider was the strong, aggressive, violent and reliable man for business.

The very fact that Saleem took the drastic step in beating up Jaquon might have been a part of this elaborate dance, an action he thought necessary to prevent the disparity between himself and Haider—brought into sharp relief when Jaquon felt brazen enough to take his supplies and walk away while working for Haider—from escalating to the point when a conflict with Haider might leave Saleem with no chance of victory or even an exit approaching level terms. He could not leave this challenge unanswered, for that
would be a sure way to lose honor on the street; everybody would know that Haider had “punked” him, bested him without consequence. The mystery is whether Haider indeed instigated Jaquon to steal the supplies as a way to trigger the conflict with Saleem. If he did, it is unclear if he was unprepared for Saleem’s brazen reaction and subsequent rush to precipitate a face-to-face confrontation. Saleem began coming to the block earlier than Haider (although he came by only in the evenings, and did not stay long), again trying to demonstrate his willingness to stand up and be challenged for his actions. All three of Saleem’s moves then—the fight with Jaquon, the attempt to trigger the confrontation with Haider, and the early loss of anger once he had confronted Haider—could be a cluster of strategic maneuvers to exit a fight he could not realistically win. Saleem could only bring the situation to a standstill by taking the initiative to pursue the conflict. He could not gain anything here.

The balance between the two men standing across from each other and conducting their business every day, which was threatened by the theft and the beating, was restored, if only for the time being. Jaquon would return, and things would have to be managed for a few days so he and Saleem would not flare up while going past each other on the street or in one of the stores. The longer-range game of competing was at a lull for the moment. Haider had inaugurated the moment by bringing a number of young men into the sales, and more importantly, appearing a better authority figure to those who were working with Saleem. This was surprising on the face of it, because Saleem was the “cooler” of the two. He was famous for his high school football exploits, was younger and more energetic, more into music and women and nice clothes and shoes, and in these ways ostensibly someone who might attract young men trying to make a name for
themselves. However, as it eventually turned out, Haider read the corner and the situation more perspicuously. Since his return from prison and re-entry into the business he had bided his time, maintained cordiality with Saleem while sizing up the options and the heft Saleem had on the street as well as with suppliers (they shared a supplier). In addition, Saleem’s charisma was good for business in general; more people came to the corner since his return.

In spite of the temporary lull after this confrontation, Haider and Saleem were locked in a struggle. This incident was one of a few punctuation points that inevitably emerged in the process of Haider acting on his desire to take over the blocks in this part of the avenue completely for himself. He would succeed eventually, partly through his own actions and fortune and partly through Saleem’s bad fortune (which most agreed Saleem brought upon himself). Slowly, almost inexorably, many of the younger men working for Saleem went over to Haider.

This chapter examines how, committed to instruments of aggression and the reality of a life they recognize and abandon themselves to, black men working in the illicit economy on the street struggle with each other. Refusing their stigmatization by whatever constitutes the gestalt we call “mainstream normativity,” these men fight for precedence among their brethren. Conducted by a socially dishonored group that refuses to give up its pride, it expresses the “dream of the personal voice written large. It is [also] a dream that sometimes degenerates into a nightmare” (Meeker 1979:31).

Embrogiled in a life of struggle, danger, and aggression on the margins of a system that dishonored and devalued them, Haider and Saleem recognized the reality facing them and abandoned themselves to it. Their conflict with each other opened up
fascinating possibilities of a political life on the margins and fired their imaginations.

Yet, no hierarchy emerged from the exchanges over matters of turf, supply, crew, and respect between Haider and Saleem; none, perhaps, was intended.

In the sense of instrumental and material benefits that one might realistically expect to amass from such a dispute (giving the struggle a pragmatic aspect), neither man ultimately won much, although there certainly were some material rewards to be had. Haider’s was eventually a short and pyrrhic victory, at least by some conventional standard of what winning might mean and what might follow in the wake of victory. He was in prison soon after, and Saleem had to stop working on the corner because of other threats to his life.

And still, there was a winner to choose. This winner was Haider, both in the sense of being ascendant before his fall, and in terms of where he ended up after his fall. While Saleem showed signs of “settling down,” trying to participate in legal occupations, Haider remained defiantly wedded to his self-conception as a real man on the street. Saleem’s attempts at legal careers and Haider’s incarceration might mean that Haider still won: he became one of the “lost ones” again, and in the brief time he was back out on the street he had consolidated the portrait of himself as the “realest nigger,” to which the return to prison added the final flourish. By the local bases of evaluation in the street corner society at the margins, Haider’s abandonment of his self to aggression and its possibilities (which included incarceration) enhanced the aura around his name, even as he languished in prison.

Haider’s name “rang out” sporadically on the street in his absence, testifying to the social value and validation of his pursuit. It was not a completely narcissistic, vain
struggle that only he recognized. At the same time, the struggle he waged with Saleem and the conception of honor-as-precedence that motivated it was not a heroic one. It was not informed by a wider normative conception of right and wrong, and he was not seeking to fulfill a narrative of the man who used his strengths to achieve ends that were universally socially valuated as noble. There was the street, and there was the possibility for precedence that he and others recognized and strove for.

Indeed, the man of honor is often (and often must be) the “lost one,” the black body taken out of circulation from the street by the state. The lost ones are the imprisoned, swept up in the punitive regime that shreds the social and economic fabric of the urban community and manages this destruction through mass incarceration of black bodies, creating a vicious-virtuous cycle of the accumulation of various capitals.\textsuperscript{198} In this manner—and this is the monstrosity—these men and their struggles for glory serve the ends of the system.

This is a life on the margins of a society redolent with images of hedonistic self-affirming consumption promised to everyone. Power is promised but always slips away, leaving the street corner to perpetually reconstitute itself in the wake of those swept away by the state or internecine violence. So this “surrogate social system” falls prey to its “in-built tendency to self destruction” (Black-Michaud 1975:160). What remains are the street and the game—perpetual fascinations that perpetuate the difficult-yet-somehow-glorious aspirations of men who burn out at the altar of the system that wastes them.

\textsuperscript{198} The use of “virtuous” is ironic here. It refers to a language of profit that is enshrined in capitalist businesses. And indeed, the circle of street-prison-street is very lucrative for politicians and the prison industry.
Wonder years: Saleem and Haider return from Prison

The Space of the Street

From an elevated vantage point— in this instance the window of my room in the apartment on the corner—on a sunny afternoon, the following is the organization of the various groups of men working on the boulevard. In front, across the boulevard from me, outside a large outlet on the corner: Haider, and later his crew of youngsters, which included Jaquon. The number fluctuated from three to eight over the course of his time back on the street and the culmination of his struggle with Saleem, a period of roughly two years. On the same side as Haider, but divided by a side street, in front of a service outlet and the old convenience store: Otis, working independently; a temporary position, as Otis moved around and was often not even there. Across the street, in front of a restaurant and the new convenience store: Gamal, an independent worker who would occasionally retail for one of the crews by purchasing a small supply from them. Also, Misam, and his kin-based crew of Saif and Ronak. It is important to note that while I refer to this crew as Misam’s, he was not a leader in the sense that Haider became, or Saleem aspired to be. The three worked together, and Misam was the more vocal of the three. His position on the sidewalk drifted around the corner into what was the last block of the city, where he also lived in an apartment. This building would later catch fire, which had implications for the men on the street, especially Ali who was trying to build a presence there.

On this same side, Ali’s “day one niggas,” his friends since childhood who could be seen on the same strip in front of the restaurant and Deron, who was there all day (Ali usually came in the afternoon), and occasionally Andrew. Jalal later joined this group,
and was eventually the only one left as Ali and Deron moved on to other endeavors. Near the end of my fieldwork Javion, a young man whose brother was working hard to get a football scholarship and whose father was a successful property owner and technician, joined Jalal.

Right below my vantage point, at the apex of the triangle formed by the two sides just described: a car parked with Habbakuk in it. He was Haider’s brother, and was largely not part of the retail trade except for a few months during one year of fieldwork. Presumably he was making up a shortfall in cash flow, as he preferred not to work in the riskiest segment of the business, instead organizing the supply chain and connecting some wholesalers to those on the street. “I spend one thousand to thirteen-hundred dollars every day,” I once overheard Habbakuk say.

The side street between Haider and Otis: two men moved in and out of this area, Demetrius and Nathan. They did not do business on the boulevard. Nathan was rumored to run a couple of crews elsewhere. It was unclear whether he had a full time organizational interest in these crews, or was simply their main supplier, providing goods in the morning and collecting his returns in the evening. Nathan’s “dimes” (small plastic pouches of marijuana worth ten dollars) were reputed to be the “fattest and finest,” with Otis once laughing ironically at the impossibility of “competing with that shit.” One evening, he was about to serve a customer, but Nathan cut in, offering a dime bag that was substantially larger and filled with fresher looking marijuana than Otis’.

Demetrius was an enigmatic figure as far as the business was concerned. No one clearly knew his role although he was certainly in the game. Rajinder more than once commented on his unusual ability to never be out on the street when the police came,
either in a regular drive-through, or in an organized raid. Demetrius was also a friend of one of Stella’s adopted sons,\textsuperscript{199} who passed away at a young age due to diabetes-related complications.

This was the landscape of Haider and Saleem’s contentious encounter. As the reader might have noticed, Saleem has not figured in this layout. This is partly because although Saleem largely occupied the area in front of Rajinder’s new convenience store and spent a lot of time inside the nearly defunct barbershop near this store, he kept irregular hours at work, and often did his work on the phone. This also became a reason for instability when he started to build a crew. His charisma certainly attracted some of the younger men; but organizing regular supplies, setting up shifts, and creating a stable place to stand and work for them was a perennial challenge.

Around the time I began my research, Haider and Saleem had recently returned from time spent in prison. Both had come back to where they were raised. Saleem was a football player in the local high school, where he set many records. Once while we were hanging out on the corner late at night, he reminded others boastfully that, years later, his sixty-yard dash record still stood. Michael had commented once that Saleem had excellent hand-eye coordination and would have surely made it to the National Football League (NFL). Not only that, “good family too; they even moved away from here to keep him away from the street thing, but somehow he still turned out this way.” “One of the best ever Kart, one of the best,” Javion’s father Rahim, a football coach himself, had told me.

\textsuperscript{199} For more on Stella’s son, see Chapter 3.
Haider also seemed to come from a family of means, although the details were rather sparse, and given how our relationship developed, I was restricted in talking to him and gathering too many details about his personal life from his own mouth. Talking about someone on the street with someone else on the street was frowned upon, and most people would only maintain a studied silence or speak in vague generalities if asked about another. From what I gathered, he came from a working family, and Rajinder told me that his wife was the manager of a laboratory. Barnabas, a local politician who tried to do what he could directly in the community apart from his legislative and civic duties, remembered Haider as one of the guys who had come to the school in Irvington with Demetrius and had broken the nose of a Haitian student. At that time, Barnabas was trying to get Demetrius a basketball scholarship and enroll him in regular coaching, but those efforts did not go far after the incident.

By his appearance, Haider might have been a wrestler. He was immense, stocky, and wide with big arms. He had full lips and a long beard, a face set as if in an abbreviated snarl in repose. Initially in our interactions, he was warm and friendly, maintaining cordiality while he sized me up. This form of interaction soon broke down over an introduction to a friend, a conversation that did not go well. Trying to maintain face, while his friend aggressively challenged me, I failed to navigate the conversation without antagonism. Sensitive despite his gruff exterior, Haider was not happy at the way I spoke back to his friend. This failure was an unfortunate happenstance early in fieldwork that created a different form of distancing and nearness between Haider and me: short, sharp and indirect conversations, exchange of glances, and one contentious
encounter on the street. From then on, I relied a lot on Rajinder to learn what was happening in Haider’s life.

Exuberant and effervescent, Saleem soon became a sight and attraction on the block after returning from a few years in prison his twenties. “Wonder years Kart, wonder fucking years,” he said. Perhaps he was simply saying they were potentially great years, but I was also reminded of the television show “The Wonder Years,” about the youth of a fictional character named Kevin Arnold. When I asked him about it, Saleem recalled seeing the show on reruns, but not if it made much of an impression. Saleem would come around to the street at noon from farther south in New Jersey where he lived with his mother. Wearing expensive sneakers and t-shirts in his favorite color, Saleem also knew quite a few girls and they began to come around once word got out about his return. Tall, extremely well built, a handsome face with chiseled jaw and long hair in dreads, Saleem made an impressive sight. “Magnificent,” I said to him when he pointed to a girl across the street one day and asked me, “what you think of that?” As soon as I responded to his question, he cursed the girl and walked away shaking his head. The girl was involved with him a few years ago, and now came around occasionally, perhaps to present herself on the street and make him jealous, perhaps make him desire her again. He never elaborated why he pointed her out to me only to curse her. But that was how it was with Saleem: he did not need to explain his outbursts and his actions, one simply had to accept what he said or be prepared for arguments, which we had quite a few times.

Michael, the proprietor of the sandwich and ice cream store underneath my apartment, had introduced me to Saleem. Michael told Saleem about my university and that I was doing some research. Saleem and I bonded when he needed help to operate a
voice recorder that he had acquired to record his raps and the rest of a book he had started writing in prison on the recorder. I had used a similar recorder during field research in India many years ago, and soon I was putting music on his mp3 player as well. One day, he walked up to me and wordlessly gave me the manuscript of his book. It was a blue spiral bound notebook in which he had written the story with a pencil. It had been lying at a friend’s place, and now he handed it over to me. It was the story of a man imprisoned, how his family fell apart and filled him with motivation for revenge against those who had betrayed. “All we had to do, was make it,” read the single line on the first page of the manuscript. We met only once to discuss the book, when his steady girlfriend who was soon to be the mother of his child also came. I cooked lentils and rice, and a dish of beans for the two of them. I suggested to him that he needed to decide what happens in the next 100 pages or so, and begin writing with that end in mind. I also offered a spare laptop for whenever he wanted to work on it.

Saleem had cousins and relatives around the neighborhood, and for them he could do no wrong. He was the one who was going to make it, and he almost did, and that was enough to secure their perpetual admiration. Unlike the commonplace view and lack of sympathy I observed for personal failure in the United States, his inability to finish college and get drafted into the National Football League did not mar their perception of him. I still recall the reverence with which Adrian, a cousin of Saleem’s, sat and listened to a song that Saleem had rapped on. Some of us had once gathered at my apartment on a cold winter evening. Adrian sat there, beaming as Saleem dropped verse over the beat. There were a few songs that Saleem had recorded with a friend and associate. It was one of those CDs that often circulated briefly on the street, always a paucity of copies, always
a problem with labeling and identification, and always waiting for a wider audience. I had one for a few days because Saleem had handed it to me for safekeeping and to make copies, just like he had handed me his book manuscript, which was earlier handed over to someone whose house it stayed in for months. Saleem liked taking things, and he liked handing over things that needed nurturing or protection, it seemed to me. Once handed over, they lay there, until someone decided to do something with them, or not. After that first time where we discussed it over dinner, he never made another meeting we planned, and we had a heated argument in which I listed the 22 times he had said he wanted to come and discuss it and failed to arrive. “You have to separate intentions from actions Kart, you have to separate intentions from actions. Don’t look at my actions, listen to my intentions,” he told me. The next day, I returned the manuscript to him and wished him the best with it. A year later, he told me he had handed it to someone else, and they had proceeded to lose it.

An aspiring rapper himself, Adrian was usually quite disrespectful of the etiquette that others in his circle who visited my apartment followed. He would take food from the refrigerator without asking, spill ash on the floor when smoking without making any gesture to clean it up or apologizing, and generally remain oblivious to the consternation he caused me in our interactions inside my apartment. Not that it was personal; Adrian simply liked to act in a way that unsettled others. It made even more surprising this rare moment where he was looking up to someone, admiring the rhyme Saleem had delivered without reservation, without a reflex reaction of competitiveness. “This is just great,” he beamed. I was not as impressed with the verse as Adrian and a couple of others from Saleem’s extended family seemed to be. However, Adrian’s reaction gave me pause.
What was it about Saleem, in spite of all his inconsistent behavior, unreliability, his failure to take the chance at glory not everyone was given—to make it in sports, make money and achieve success with the talent he had? I wondered about this often as that moment of Adrian’s admiration came back to me.

After his return, Saleem began working on the right side of the block, which he shared with Gamal, an independent seller, and Misam and his crew of three. Misam was a big, friendly man, often drunk in the afternoons and struggling to make enough money. His crewmembers were Ronak and Saif. Ronak was short and steeped in the rhetoric of personal and mental strength. He made a point to tell me that “if it’s on us, it’s ours,” explaining that no matter what might have actually happened, if a police charge fell upon one of them, the code of the street dictated that they must bear it and not “snitch”: reveal the truth by implicating someone else as really responsible. “If there’s one thing you’re going to say about me, about us, we are cool, calm, and collected.” Maintaining poise in the face of threats and difficulties was important for Ronak. In the time I knew him, he was incarcerated for a few months and then released on parole with an electronic bracelet tied to his ankle. He proudly accepted my compliment about his built-up physique, telling me he did nothing but work out while in jail. Saif never exchanged a word with me in three years. I once tried to engage him in a conversation early during fieldwork as we both stood in a store and watched the National Basketball Association (NBA) finals on the television installed there. He looked at me, smiled and shook his head, and politely waved me off with a mumble. Wearing long dreads and very quiet in general, Saif was imprisoned for discharging a firearm. I encountered him again at the corner store when he
returned, looking exactly as he did before he was imprisoned. He acknowledged me with a nod, and that was the only other communication between us.

These imprisonments, and Misam’s drinking meant that his crew generally became unsuccessful in sustaining themselves through work on the street. Misam was robbed once, not only a materially crippling loss but also one that further denuded his reputation. A collision with a slow-moving bus left him collecting disability benefits and a small settlement, but in general his material situation was precarious if not regularly desperate. His wife struggled to get him back home every night, trying to protect him from harm and the cruel jocularity of other men who might be drinking with him. From the start it was clear that Misam would be marginal to the power struggle that would develop between Saleem and Haider. At the time however, both men newly returned from prison concentrated on getting back into the rhythm of work, solidifying their supply chain and presence on the street again, reconnecting with those who would help them and re-establishing their credibility in the game.

In business terms, Saleem’s reputation increased the “footfall” on the block—the number of people who came around to buy or just hang out with him. This was good for business in general, as more people might pass through looking for their substance of choice here. It was when he began to try and organize the young men who gravitated towards him into crews that trouble began, notably with Haider. After both men had crews operating for a while, this became an issue, and there were tensions simmering when a couple of the youngsters left Saleem and began to work for Haider. This culminated in the fight over Jaquon, and while they came out of it with their respective positions intact for the moment, Saleem’s star was in decline. Haider had already built his
crew, and had already begun to funnel members away from Saleem. Soon, Saleem had to leave or face physical threats because of problems with a few men beyond the block. Haider held undisputed sway over the block for a short moment. Even though the others continued to work there, for once there was no countervailing person and group that could claim to be on the same level as Haider. One realm in which Saleem managed his return to the street better than Haider was in avoiding encounters with police and the criminal justice system. Haider had already been arrested once by the time he beat up Jaquon. Soon, a second arrest crystallized my relationship with him, as well as Rajinder’s ability to run his business with respect and without disruptions.

**Rajinder, and Haider’s Second arrest**

I laughed nervously as Rajinder said over the phone, “Sir, dekho aap wahan khare mat raho, nahin to shayad aap ko bhi utha lenge (Sir, look, don’t keep standing there, or (they) might pick you up also). I was about to get into a car with a friend of mine, who happened to be a lawyer. In front of me, a fully armored policeman stood on a stool at the laundromat, reaching behind the video game machine. Six police cars surrounded the laundromat. It was the first police raid I had seen right beneath my apartment. I got in the car and we drove away; there was little to learn from watching the police upend the laundromat looking for stashed drugs. Those who were arrested had already been driven away. I did not see Haider. As I learned later, he had been hiding in the apartment building, and witnessed the unfortunate moment when I laughed nervously on the phone.

The day after the raid I saw Haider pacing up and down in front of the garage while Ali smoked a Black & Mild and Jafaris stood looking into the distance. Haider and I had not been on speaking terms for some months at the time, following the heated
conversation with his friend. As I walked near them on my way to the store, I heard Haider say to them, “don’t tell this motherfucker a goddamn thing.” I stopped and looked at Ali as I had not seen him in over a week. He looked a little pensive and serious. “Keep it moving man,” Haider told me, and it was obvious he was wound up and ready to go off. “I’m just saying hello to my friend,” I told him, turned to Ali and asked, “you OK?,” to which he nodded, and I walked away.

A few days later, Haider was locked up, caught after a short chase between some houses on the side street. I heard about it from Rajinder, who seemed to be somewhat disinterested in it all despite being keen to tell me (I surmised from the two missed calls he gave me in the morning and the text saying “sir kuch news hai” [there is some news]). The cops hit Haider a few times, even though, being burly, he did not make them chase him much at all. He was caught in possession of some “controlled and dangerous substances.” I was surprised that reticent and disinterested as he appeared to be, Rajinder still shared so much detail and knew so much in the first place. I asked him how he knew so much, and he said the people on the corner told him afterward. I expressed my hopes for an early release for Haider. Contentious as our relationship had become, I respected, even admired Haider as a man, and almost felt a surge of anger against the police and courts in solidarity. “Woh to jaldi hi aa jayega, chinta mat karo. Yahan kai logon ki rozi roti us par tiki hai. Gharwale bail de denge, ten percent hi hota hai.” [Oh he’ll be out quite soon, you don’t need to worry. Here many people’s daily bread is reliant on him. Family members will give the bail; it is only ten percent of the set amount]. Rajinder said this with the pragmatic cheerfulness of someone who had seen tough times in his life, had his own run-ins with the law back home, and knew what life was like on the street here.
Then, a little playful, he left me with a question: “lekin ye kiya kisne, woh log wahan par maal kuch samay ke liye hi rakhte hain, police ekdum sahi time par aayi thi.” [But I wonder who did this. Those guys keep their stuff in [the laundromat] for a very short time. The police came at exactly the right time].

A few weeks ago, Rajinder had been sharing his frustrations with “yahan ke kale log” (the black people from here) that he dealt with everyday. He was a strong and savvy man from Punjab in India, belonging to the proud community of Sikhs renowned for their martial tradition, and stereotypically known for their exuberance and spirit for life. Caught up in a difficult property dispute that had led to some violence between him and his extended kin family, Rajinder left India as much to pursue the Dream in America as he had to get away from a volatile situation. He came to these shores 7 days before I came in 2007. Having worked for relatives in different stores across New Jersey, he was now going out on his own, while his wife pursued a Ph.D. in the sciences. This was the first store he had acquired, in partnership with a cousin who was a citizen of the U.S. Together, but largely with Rajinder’s drive behind it, they were making a go of it.

The very first day I walked into the store after moving into the neighborhood, Rajinder greeted me with a big smile and immediately wanted to strike up a conversation. Looking for people to talk to, it was a relief for me to see a fellow countryman who might know a little more about the neighborhood. We warmed to each other immediately, I being thankful to have a place to “hang out” while I built contacts, and Rajinder happy to share his knowledge and have some company during the many moments of downtime when no one came into the store. He was my key informant. We were also both South Asians, permanent outsiders in the sense that we did not grow up in or belong to this
neighborhood. As things turned out, Rajinder would gain status, and serve to mediate some situations, my argument with Haider (see below) included.

Rajinder was aware that he was competing with a well-established store across the street; the owners were also Punjabis who had been in the neighborhood for over 20 years, although a few of my interlocutors accused them of being racist. He did not want to get into a competition over the pricing of products. Instead he set about building relationships with everyone who came into the store, being congenial, talking with them, and letting them know that if he did not have something they wanted, he will get it for them next week. One set of the most frequent customers were the men on the corner. Rajinder engaged them with just the right mixture of aggression and friendliness. He was friendly, let them charge their phones in the shop and use his laptop once in a while, and in the same friendly way let them know that he was no punk, he carried a gun (I never saw it), and that he was a “straight shooter.” He also eventually extended credit to most of the street regulars and a few other regular customers. After lobbying a while for the lottery license, he became a master at getting people to play, chatting and cajoling and entertaining them, making it fun. He was a real builder and teacher, always frustrated that he could not get his staff (two other men who worked in shifts at the store) to engage the customers like he did. Finally, having built up the shop into a viable business, he sold it and bought a few other places of the same kind—a convenience store and two gas stations. Rajinder was a man to be reckoned with in the ‘hood.’

There were moments when interactions would annoy and hurt him, too. He did not speak fluent English, and, to the ears of those in the neighborhood, had a thick accent. In East Orange, a couple of regular customers had told him that they respected him
because “you call us motherfucker to our face.” But in RapCity, teenagers would make fun of him once in a while, repeating the way he said some words (“maaderfucker, madderfucker”) and mumbling in an annoying way as they left the store. Rajinder was not inscrutable and would get frustrated in such moments. At other times, he would have arguments with some of the guys on the street over credit or over them trying to make illegal transactions in the store, and they would defy him, abuse him and walk out, only to eventually return and make peace with him. These were moments when he had to exercise restraint, and it took all of his emotional resources to maintain his composure. After all, he would say to me, I am working here and trying to make something, build something. These people come into the store, they don’t know what they want, they have hardly any money and yet they act so proud. They don’t know who I used to be, what I did, and they talk like I am some chutiya (colloquial: an asshole) in the street.

Just like anyone else, Rajinder would bang heads with Saleem, who was incorrigible at times, refusing to listen to any reason or trying to understand another’s point of view. Once Rajinder told him that he could not keep coming in, charging his phone, taking the laptop, using up all the paper towels that he wanted, going into the bathroom, and trying to leave a suspicious black plastic bag behind the ATM. Rather than recognizing that Rajinder ran the store after all and was only doing him a favor, Saleem began to shout and argue, threatening Rajinder. He made it appear as if Rajinder was safe only because Saleem was protecting him, that he might get robbed or have his store vandalized otherwise. This was too much for Rajinder; he could not countenance Saleem suggesting he was under Saleem’s obligation. “From day one motherfucker, I am here. You bring anyone, I will take care. Try to scare me? I fucking not scared of you or any of
you black motherfuckers.” It could get more volatile, but Rajinder spoke to Haider instead, telling him that he should tell Saleem to not take liberties with him.

This friction between Saleem and Rajinder began a little after Haider and Saleem had returned from prison. Saleem was building up the block with his presence and the crew he was putting together had not defected over to Haider’s side. They maintained cordiality, and would share a drink sometimes on weekend nights. Haider could talk to Saleem about patching things up with Rajinder, and he did, but Saleem lacked the finesse to come back and sort things out by talking to Rajinder without having to apologize or concede too much. The détente with Rajinder was largely because of Rajinder’s interest in defusing the situation. Still, Rajinder’s pride was stung, and he also bided his time.

Saleem’s conduct with the people with whom he regularly came into contact eventually cost him more than his relationship with Rajinder. Eventually Saleem lost his crew to Haider, who easily outmaneuvered him. His relationship with his girlfriend was breaking down over the upcoming birth of their child, and this meant he did not have reliable access to a car anymore. This affected his availability and consistency with customers.

Following the police raid, Haider returned as Rajinder predicted. Within a couple of days, we ran into each other at the convenience store, in front of Rajinder. I looked over and gave Haider a half smile, happy to see he was out but acknowledging that we were not on speaking terms. I thought perhaps this might be a moment to talk, as Rajinder was also present and the two of them got along just fine. Instead, Haider put a finger in my face and proceeded to abuse and threaten me. “If I find out you had anything to do with my arrest, I will fuck you up.” I was intimidated, and looked away towards Rajinder
as I picked up my cigarette. Rajinder looked at me with a knowing smile, conveying what he believed was the difference between us: I was not cut out for this, Rajinder was. Angry and disturbed, I took my cigarette and walked out of the store, but did not leave. I stood outside, trying to regain my composure and debating whether to confront Haider when he came out.

Haider came out soon enough, and we had some more words. I defended myself, challenging him to find some proof of my involvement before he slandered me again. It quickly became a spectacle, people gathering and watching, my whole persona up for display and evaluation. Moreover, my research was at risk if he assaulted, or “punked” me in some way. The moment changed when, after listening to his insults, I finally repeated what I once had heard Rajinder say. Forcing as much anger as I could muster onto my face, I hurtled over his speech and said, “I’m not a street guy.” Haider paused, and the dynamic shifted.

Besting me was therefore of little value for Haider, who most certainly saw himself as a “street guy.” There was nothing to be gained by “punking,” or humiliating me publicly, because I had let it be known that I was not part of any horizontal relationship network with Haider. Excluding myself from his social universe, I could finally speak. In this public moment, I also crystallized and consolidated my exclusion.

“Enough of this, tell me when you are done with this shit and I will speak,” I said.

“Aight, speak,” Haider returned after a pause.

I recounted what I thought my equation with him was, how at one time we had been cordial with each other and had had some misunderstandings, and how he knew
what I asked others in the neighborhood because I told him myself. If he heard from anyone that I said anything about him, he could come back right here and talk to me. If he tried to slander me again, he would have to produce some proof like a “green sheet” (a page in the police report of the arrest) with my name on it. Or else he needs to stop with baseless allegations and threats.

Fixing me with his stare by way of a response, Haider put his hand out, shook mine and walked away. Sheila walked up saying, “it’s all the cameras they got around here” that probably had something to do with Haider’s arrest. Curiously, a few minutes later, Haider walked out of the store again, and told me as he went across the street, “I heard what he [Rajinder] said, I listened to what he said.” “Listen to yourself,” I said, urging him to remember what he knew about me from the earlier days when I had begun my fieldwork.

There was something a little “off” about the whole interaction. There was no real reason for Haider to accuse me unless he was simply letting off steam. Rajinder told me later that he had told Haider once I had left the store, “why you talk to [Kartikeya] like that, he’s a good guy.” He also told me that he did not come out and defend me because he did not want it to become an “Indian vs. Black” thing, and that he knew I could take care of myself. Some weeks later he revealed that Haider’s suspicions arose because he saw me laugh as I got into the car the night of the raid. I immediately asked Rajinder whether he told Haider the truth, that I was not laughing at what was happening, and that in fact I was on the phone with Rajinder. He simply smiled.

For the longest time after this incident, I put Haider’s actions down to the paranoia of a hunted man who did not know how he had gotten caught. The timing of the
police raid on the laundromat had really been precise. And while they did not get him that day, the police got Haider just two days later, with the assumption (or so we thought) that he was connected to the stash of drugs they found at the laundromat. However, it was a truism that the police could pick up anyone they wanted if they came at certain times to the street (“we’re in a fishbowl,” as Saleem said). There had to be nothing specific about Haider’s arrest. It was the laundromat raid that had the ring of a greater coordination, and Haider’s arrest just two days later was tied together with the raid in both his mind and mine because of the coincidence. Still, it was not credible that Haider had simply forgotten what he knew about me from the time we were friendly with each other and genuinely suspected me. It was difficult to assimilate an outsider who was now living there for the purpose of what he called “research,” but we had spoken enough with each other for him to at least assess the truth of my claims. Now he suddenly seemed willing to believe that I had informed on him, and that I had been tracking his movements well enough to direct the police? It dawned on me that perhaps I had uncritically accepted Rajinder’s piecing together of the situation.

Threatening me with physical violence, Haider had included me in his universe of masculinity. My initial response threatened to push me out of that circle. Rajinder’s mediation further consolidated his honor amongst this group of men, and eventually I managed an exchange that restored my position as the marginal stranger to the group, a position I was in danger of losing after Haider’s accusation and threat. A man who breaks the rules of the group by going outside, to police or law enforcement is a pariah, no matter his initial position within or outside the group (or at the seam of this inside-outside boundary) the group. While I was never integrated into the group, only placed on its
margins as an outsider, that relation of marginality to the group ensured I was given the basic respect of acknowledgment as I walked down the street—a nod in most cases, a fist bump in a few others, and a proper handshake and exchange of conversation (and occasionally, interviews in my apartment) in still others. This position would have been erased if it had turned out to be true that I was someone who broke the rules, little as they applied to me. With Haider shaking my hand, I could continue to exist as a marginal, yet meaningful (significant) entity on the street and around the men who claimed the street. Rajinder mediated as a man of honor whose views were respected without any binding obligation, and thereby enhanced his position with the men on the street. Having built up a store in competition with the other Indians across the street, he had achieved quite a degree of success. Eventually, he built up a business that did not exist before, and like a true opportunistic entrepreneur, sold the store to a man from Egypt and moved away from the neighborhood.200

Black Men, Aggression, and the Struggle for Glory

In fights over honor, men display their leadership capacities without drawing in the whole group. The dispute is an end in itself, a “game” in which men reveal themselves and find their identities in the only relations permitted by the system. [Lindholm 1982:77; emphasis added]

Honor is above all the keen sensitivity to the experience of humiliation and shame, a sensitivity manifested by the desire to be envied by others and propensity to envy the successes of others. [Miller 1993:84]

This chapter has tried to tell the story of a socially dishonored group. Or rather, one should say this chapter examines the story of a persona, the figure of the “black male”: given the individualized ethic of U.S. society, the neoliberal rhetoric of

200 And not a moment too soon. As the corner dissipated, this Egyptian man struggled to run the business; he was looking for potential buyers by the time I left RapCity.
individualization that provides the “cultural glue” which holds together the marketization of life, the punitive and stigmatizing transformation of welfare, and the rise of mass incarceration as a tool for managing the social disorder produced by marketization and concomitant decline of the welfare state. A convenient hold-all and “commonsensical” invocation of a cluster of biases, fears and prejudice, the black man serves a versatile set of functions for “mainstream” society in the United States. Unless exhilarating and entertaining the audience in commodified spectacles of sport or artistic endeavor, black men (specifically those from low income urban neighborhoods who work in the informal economy), are the most maligned persona in U.S. society.201 Mainstream national and local media regularly purvey stories replete with sensationalized detail about how one of these black men met his fate, or destroyed the life of a law-abiding, good citizen. It is not certain whether the specific black man killed by the police, or any man who died this way, was a criminal. Yet, with numbing regularity after the death of a black man in an urban community, we hear hints and allusions, and where possible, we are treated to suggestive images by the media. One might see an image of him holding the ubiquitous “blunt,” a long cigarette rolled out of cigar leaf and ostensibly filled with marijuana. Where available, there will be images of the recently dead young man making “gang signs,” posing with a certain aggression and bravado—things that most teenagers or youth in groups might do. Attached to this specific persona, these images and suggestions become signifiers of this person’s status as a threat and of his self-willed self-destruction.

201 As a professional acquaintance pointed out to me once, the working black man, middle class or working class, remains invisible in the public imagination. Athletes and entertainers and those involved in these two industries, are the popular black figures.
We do not need to mourn; we do not need to ask why; what happened is in the nature of things. Again, the “scary black” stands in for all black males. He seems to articulate an inchoate threat. Something felt but unexpressed comes into language in the image, the sign, of the black man. The black man, dead or posing, threatens society and our sense of order. He induces fear and invites approval of his relegation to the margins where he can kill other black men, be killed in incidents with law enforcement, or be locked away in a place where “citizens” are safe from him, and he can be brutalized as his nature demands he must be (while also being profited from by being worked at a miniscule fraction of minimum wage and from tax dollars spent on prisons). This cluster of prejudice, fear, and hatred makes us all feel safe when a politician, Democrat or Republican, proclaims his love for being “tough on crime.”\textsuperscript{202} Socially dishonored, an object of fear and marginal to society, it is exactly as this dishonorable, fear-inducing persona that the black man is of value to capitalist politics and economy. What a wonderfully useful thing this black man is!

While I keep in view these wider constructs of black men and mainstream U.S. society, my interpretation is not directed towards the political mainstream to make interventions and create an oppositional narrative.\textsuperscript{203} Mainly, I am attempting to stay

\textsuperscript{202} The focus has shifted recently, with state violence against this figure finally made hypervisible by movements such as Black Lives Matter. It is unclear as yet whether this inaugurates a new, sustained era of protest akin to the Civil Rights Movement that constituted a historic upheaval in the racial order of the United States.

\textsuperscript{203} It is an objective of my work to try and interpret daily life without constant recourse, implicit or explicit, to a normative backdrop that defines things as right and wrong, sets up implicit standards of reference for correct behavior and conduct. Ideas of deserving and undeserving oppressed people follow rapidly in the wake of such a standard, as do the pressures to sanitize social reality because, heaven forbid, the oppressed might act in any but the most virtuous manner. Further, as an outsider I do not seek to wade into the debate over the long term influences of slavery, Jim Crow, and enduring intergenerational deprivation as an explanation for “anti-social” behavior, although these analyses have a significant import in the life of the urban community today, an import that this young nation seems all too keen to deny. Pace the now repeated claims that the U.S. is a post-racial society, black folk need to stop complaining, they should simply “get
faithful to what my interlocutors said and showed me during my time in RapCity, deriving the significance of what it means by looking comparatively for concepts from the anthropological record. This is not to say that my interlocutors were unaware or entirely disregarding of these wider ideas, members of an “underclass” who subscribed to different norms from the rest of society, and so on. An individual or group’s view on the social structure is inflected by and emerges from within that structure (Bourdieu 1985). Rather, a position in the social field is also a point of view on the social field. As socially dishonored and marginalized men, my interlocutors in the illegal economy readily discovered that the American Dream did not really include them.

Haider knew that he was one of those men that “respectable” people feared and were even repulsed by. He was not fooled by occasional acts of civility from those who might have a chance encounter with him. Eva and Michael together ran the store selling ice cream, sandwiches, chicken wings and cold drinks. I attended the memorial service for Eva’s mother at a local church with my wife. Sometime during the service Haider came to the church. Eva’s mother was laid at rest near the stage for people to pay their last respects. He walked up to the casket, kissed her on the cheek, turned and greeted over it,” that it has been long enough (so these black men really do deserve to be locked up if they can not get their act together and hold down a job). Raised with a different conception of duration, it seems to me that Slavery ended last night, Jim Crow was legally abolished this morning (and only legally; finally this morning black folk were given the right to move the courts, to legally fight for their rights), and Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, William Chapman, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, Samuel DuBose, and many others had their lives ended by the state (legally or illegally) just a few minutes ago. Talk of post-racialism seems farcical.

For now, I focus on what life on the street might bring for those strangers who I met in my first few years in the United States of America. I did not walk into the field armed with a salutary pity for these “poor maligned men,” or a desire to find hope, and feel no need to apologize for their actions or my portrayal of them. An anger about things as they are exists in me, but there seems no need for a self-serving spillage on to these pages. Again, perhaps these issues are better addressed in a conclusion. Separately, coming to understand my relationship as an outsider is the work of a longer time that does not need to be neatly enclosed within this dissertation.
Michael and Eva, and left. Simply wanting to pay his respects in recognition of his friendship with Michael and Eva, he wanted no further part of the service, the niceties of middle-class life, a life that was now foreclosed to him and represented an active hostility to his very existence as a “thug,” a “gangbanger,” the “scourge of communities,” as the black man that represented everything that was wrong with black people. Haider had self-respect, but was under no illusion that he was “respectable.”

This is a life on the peripheries of economic citizenship, but oversaturated just like the mainstream with images and visions of hedonistic, self-affirming consumption. From the vantage of a daily life lived in this context, commerce in the illegal economy on the street frames one’s investment in a certain kind of life—one contoured by forms of scarcity and animated by competitive aggression and conflict at its center—and the imaginative possibilities it offered.

**Scarcity**

Jacob Black-Michaud (1975) posits structured exchange of violence as a model of society in his study of feud among Mediterranean and Middle Eastern pastoral and sedentary social groups. In feuding groups in the Middle East and Mediterranean—amid a harsh and constraining ecology and an uncertain and unpredictable existence—exchange of violence and struggle over honor emerge as a mechanism of politics and the creation of hierarchy and organization, no matter how tenuous. Exchanges of violence in feud serve as “an instrument of social control, a means of communication and a language

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204 “...co-operation, conflict and leadership are the irreducible components of all forms of prolonged social contact...combined with historical and oecological variables [they] constitute a model of society.” (Black-Michaud 1975:168).
for the expression of temporary relations of domination and subordination (172).”

It is a mechanism allowing for leadership to emerge in societies with a strongly egalitarian ethic and an absence of effective centralized authority, as a means of managing access to resources in conditions of “total scarcity,” while also sating men’s desire for a political life, a life in which some lead and some follow.

**Scarcity – total and partial, material and moral**

Total scarcity is described as the “moral, institutional and material premise of a certain type of society in which *everything* felt by the people themselves to be relevant to human life is regarded by those people as existing in absolutely inadequate quantities” (Black-Michaud 1975:121-122). Where all groups or social units such as the family, the kin group, as well as groups antagonistic to one’s own are subject to the same constraints, we have a condition of total scarcity. Where it obtains to cover all members of a social group, total scarcity necessitates conflict and co-operation.

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205 In making an analysis and interpretation based on the idea of a struggle for honor, and of feud as a model of society, it is appropriate to signal a delimitation here. It is not that that struggles between the crews resemble principles of fission and fusion (and the attendant idea of segmentary lineage genealogical systems based on principles of fission and fusion, a segmentary opposition that maintains social order through the banding together and falling apart of lineage groups). Rather, some of the possibilities that flow out of these ideas, developed in a different place and time, might be useful in understanding the experience of inequality and struggle in this place.

The functional orientation of a paradigm that understands violence as ordered by the principle of segmentary lineage and in turn functions as an ordering principle for society has been critiqued, complicated, and to a great extent, set aside as a problem of political order (Peters 1967). Rather, I am intrigued by the possibility that these principles “suggest a kind of political language… [in which] the existence of relationships is associated with the violence of relationships.” (Meeker 1979: 14) Meeker raises the question whether anthropological analysis, in its understanding of genealogy as a principle of alliance during conflict, might be mistaken in viewing this system as concerned with maintenance of order. Instead of being “a device for the control of political conflicts,” (15; emphasis added) might it not in the main be a political language mainly concerned with violence and conflict? Could it be “viewed as the product of men who define themselves as a society of men struggling with one another, a society in which men do not come together to live in peace, but come apart to live by war?” (14) This is where I join together the idea of feud with the idea of honor as a competition for precedence, and attach the conception of the image of the limited good developed by Foster.
While poverty, homelessness, and hunger are on the rise in the U.S., one could hardly conceive it as a society of total scarcity. Further, a democratic and egalitarian but in reality deeply unequal society, it is also not a homogenous group facing the same conditions of scarcity everywhere. “Partial scarcity” is a condition where certain spheres are not subject to the same constraints as others. Partial scarcity reduces the need for conflict and co-operation, offering the possibility for withdrawal from spheres of total scarcity. At the same time, only some groups or segments may have access to such spheres for accumulating material or nonmaterial surpluses (e.g. education, public fame, certain kinds of employment). Those that have such access then may not compete in the spheres where total scarcity obtains, and instead withdraw into spheres where surpluses are available and focus energies on acquiring surpluses in such spheres. This approach is taken by members of the Black middle class, insulating themselves from the street, and pursuing status in circles built around sociality in the home, the workplace, and places of leisure (golf courses, vacations) inaccessible to the men on the street. They derive their sense of social position from occupation, home ownership, and accession to mainstream norms of respectability. This situation, of heterogeneous groups with different

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206 Concerned with homogeneous social groups as a whole, Black-Michaud does not comment on the possibility of differential access to spheres of partial scarcity in non-homogeneous societies. For him, the decision to withdraw into spheres of partial scarcity is a volitional one, based on lack of ambition or aggression. He makes a very interesting observation here: if these less ambitious groups or individuals were to concern themselves solely with spheres of partial scarcity, they would “cease to form a part of society (170).” At the risk of reifying what is already a somewhat static presentation of the social class division in RapCity and Sleepytown, one might venture that this is precisely what some of the residents of Sleepytown and RapCity might prefer. Spatial proximity however, ensures that they keep getting pulled back into the “society” of their lower class cohabitants and those who work on the street (also see Footnote 16- on the identification as black).

207 The problem for the middle class is that spatial proximity and the overarching identification as black in a racially divided society prevents them from divorcing themselves completely. They might prefer to be separated from their gangster brethren, wanting repeatedly for the police other and institutional configurations to handle “those knuckleheads over there,” and recuse themselves from this community of contrasts by achieving sequestration in their own carceral archipelagos. Pace the regret in a Block Association meeting in Sleepytown about declining property values over not having gated the street a few
possibilities, “promotes the fragmentation of society into a number of interlocking sub-
groups” (171).

Total scarcity is a combination of material and “moral scarcity” (160), an analytic
separation of forms that intermingle in actual practice. Material scarcity refers to
objective shortages in resources including employment opportunities and institutional
structures of service provision. It can also include a scarcity of opportunity, or stagnation
in prospects of growth.²⁰⁸ Often in RapCity, a response to a greeting of “how are you”
would yield the simple response, “Maintaining, you know.” “Maintaining” refers to a
kind of holding pattern in daily and regular subsistence and sustenance. A person who is
maintaining is managing to get by, able to meet his basic needs and reproduce the living
cycle on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis (depending on who you ask and their
occupation, “maintaining” is true for the legally occupied working man and gangster
alike). While preferable to desperation, maintaining is a rather unhappy state of
stagnation, a situation of treading water without seeing prospects of growth and greater
security on the horizon that might motivate the person and improve the experience of the
daily routine as they make their livelihood.

Another often heard refrain is, “Can’t call it,” with the often unspoken addition,
“ain’t complaining though,” or “can’t complain though,” or simply, “can't complain”
(another variation is “I’m just maintaining man, that’s all it is. Can’t complain though.”).

²⁰⁸ Black-Michaud refers to material or ooeological scarcity, the latter being a “limited availability of the
environmental and human factors” required to alleviate material scarcity, which could refer to a “shortage
of material goods to meet consumer demands.” (160)
While “can’t complain” may suggest a connotation that there is little to complain about, that things are alright at the present time (or at least could be worse), it is largely clear that many of the men I spoke to would appreciate being in a better situation. “Can’t call it… can’t complain.” I can’t call it, cannot really tell you how things are and how they might turn out, I can’t assess the contours of my situation or predict with any certainty what will happen next. It is unclear what the relation between my struggle, my efforts and the (promised) reward is anymore. But also, since I’m an individual, solely responsible for myself and my situation, there is no sense in complaining, in questioning why living in the greatest country in the world has not yielded the rewards I might have expected as a citizen. In any case, nobody is listening to my complaints, so what is the point?209

Moral scarcity is the specific subjective understanding of objective material scarcity, and often refers to intangible elements of social relations that are perceived to be in short supply. In this diverse neighborhood, the perception of moral scarcity varies across social class. For instance, middle-class persons of color in RapCity and Sleepytown may perceive the decline of social organization (and its consequences for property values, the reputation of the area as a place to live, and the predictability of the daily round) as a larger problem than material difficulty and a lack of wealth, which is the concern of the men on the street. On the street corner a sense of moral scarcity is often palpable, an apprehension of objective material scarcity and the shortage of opportunities.

209 I was often reminded in these moments of the remarkable line from a performance of “For Colored Girls Only,” which I attended with an older middle class couple in RapCity: “Because to be black and sorry is so old.” Written in 1982, the playwright had already recognized that in the post-civil rights era, a national discourse that prizes individuality and self-sufficiency had already begun to find jarring the complaints of black folk about discrimination, difficulty and struggle in a divided country. The postracial rhetoric of elements of public discourse now that Barack Obama has been elected president is another iteration of this moment, only more extreme because these troubles must not even be enunciated lest they appear a sign of weakness, or worse, personal deficiency. ‘You have been given your rights, if you still cannot make it, something must be wrong with you. Don’t try to call it any other way, and you certainly can’t complain.’
and options to improve one’s lot. This shortage is experienced at the same time as the barrage of rhetoric that claims that these opportunities for advancement are “out there,” these opportunities for advancement just waiting to be chosen and exercised. Life on the street is framed by scarcity on the margins of a society that is centered on consumption, the commodity form, and the spectacle of commodified consumption.

**Hating and the Image of the Limited Good**

Conditions of total scarcity (as described and qualified above) nourish folk notions of the “image of the limited good” (Black-Michaud 1975; Foster 1965), an idea that “all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply” (Foster 1965:296). The economic potential of the corner was finite. Individuals could increase the overall revenue generating potential of the block to some extent, as Saleem seemed to have done for a brief period after his return from prison. Yet, any increase in revenue created by the rise of customers coming through would be soon limited by the response of local residents, who may not appreciate the corner becoming too busy; and secondly, whether the block might be able to take more customers or not, the increase in earnings of one group is perceived as a threat by others working here.

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210 This was a feature salient to this almost-middle class block. I doubt local residents had the same influence in more violent neighborhoods of RapCity. The surrounding area, both of the middle class households in RapCity and Sleepytown, seemed to have a limiting effect on the ultimate amount of street business activity. More business always involved a greater potential for violence, from stickup men whose attention might be drawn, between the groups working on the corner, from other groups working further down the Avenue, and from the police. Haider and Saleem did not come from the stereotyped and maligned “families at risk” (as euphemized by government agencies and non profits working in poor urban communities), and their families had a long association with this neighborhood.
Concomitant to this orientation is a view that personal acquisition of any of these things can only be at the expense of someone else. The phenomenon of “hating” refers to resentment at the success (perceived or otherwise) of another. Musician and actor Ice-T describes hating in a brief appearance on Chappelle Show, a program on the TV network HBO:

Real hating man, that’s like a art form man, it’s like, you like a born hater, you know like myself. Lot of cats be hating, you know. I’m mad, I’m mad at everything. Brother got a nice car, “man why you got a car, I only got one car, why you got three cars, a wife and all that,” that’s played out man. I hate on a nigger till he’s like totally broke and ain’t got nothing like me, you know what I’m saying? Yeah. That’s what real hating is all about man.

Success might be indexed in having a better house or car, a better form of employment, a stable and committed loving relationship, but just as easily and more commonly on the street in the possession of personal commodities such as branded clothing or a better pair of sneakers (for a detailed description of the signification attached to different shoes in “Gangland Chicago,” see Ralph 2014). A man who is “fresh” arouses envy as well as admiration. Dressed, for instance, in True Religion jeans, a new white t-shirt, and a pair of Air Jordan sneakers, he can be the object of hating for someone who does not have the money to spend on brand name clothes and shoes. An interlocutor who had not been in the game for years but built his reputation in it often boasted, “I have shoes that if I wore them in front of you, you won’t come out of the house for a week,” implying that his display of this coveted commodity would be so utterly humiliating for those who witnessed it, they would have to recover in private.

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211 Hating has been popularized in cultural forms such as Chappelle’s Show, a comedy show anchored by Dave Chappelle (also the protagonist of an insightful analysis by John L. Jackson, Jr. (2008) about paranoia over the tacit but persistent forms of racism encountered by black folk in ostensibly “postracial” United States). It is also a common term on radio catering to listeners of rap music, for instance on Hot 97 (97.1 FM New York City).
before they returned to the presence of others, to social life on the street (one would imagine this time away would also allow for their humiliation to fade from memory). He certainly exaggerated, and this was only “in a manner of speaking,” but such claims are common over commodities such as phones and sneakers and exemplify the currency of prestige these items garner on the street.

Hating appears a relation expressed in response to the image of the limited good, where one’s own success is always measured against the relative losses or gains of another, and the apparent opulence of one person provokes negative feelings, as if one had lost something simultaneously as it has been gained by another. It is pervasive (“lots of cats be hating”), and indexes a generalized frustration (“I’m mad at everything”).

“Why you hating” is a comment that can rapidly bring a simmering conversation to a boil. Hating may be tacitly recognized as a form of pettiness, although generally it is accepted that engaging in it is not necessarily a bad thing. An explicit accusation of the same however, indicates that the person has been bested in some aspect of their life or even simply their appearance, and that is why they are “hating.” Such a claim is not acceptable and is retorted aggressively.

**Aggression**

Aligned with the condition of scarcity is the conception of violence as a fact of life in a setting where people are vulnerable, living a life where personal and economic security is tenuous and must be aggressively defended. Violence and aggression are integral forms of communication and expression of relations between men on the street. It is sometimes overlooked that more than for the middle class and working people that live
around them, violence is a daily and perennial concern for those working on the street.\textsuperscript{212} There is constant talk of violence, vigilance around the possibility of violence, and an expressed readiness to engage in and exchange it. These are pervasive facts of the street environment. In addition to being ready for threats from other men in the street economy and the police, a man seeking precedence on the street must at some point prove his mettle through the use of force.

It is understood that a man on the street must be self-sufficient in matters of personal defense. No matter who he rides with, no matter who might be behind him, at some point and periodically he will have to prove his capacity for aggression or risk losing his status as a viable persona not just from those outside his group, but also from those within. The capacity to meet force with force, to respond in kind and with interest to threats, is a given expectation. This is how one becomes a viable member in any group that works on the corner, or affirms one’s right to work independently.\textsuperscript{213} A corner is circumscribed and delicately divided turf, laid claim to by those who occupy it. It is theirs only as long as they can maintain that claim through strength, and be seen to be maintaining this strength. Every event then, no matter how trivial, can rapidly become a reflection of the person and his group’s ability to hold its ground, literally and metaphorically.

\textsuperscript{212} This strangely imperceptible occlusion is often collapsed into a commonsense belief or assumption that it is not the context, but the men on the street that are inherently violent. The necessity of cultivating a capacity for aggression to create a relatively coherent and stable routine on the street is elided in such views.

\textsuperscript{213} For an instance of how this requirement obtained whether someone worked in a crew or independently, see Chapter 2, which describes days of Otis’s early youth on the block. He never worked with a group, instead asserting his willingness for aggression at a young age and through it eking out a spot on the block when he fully entered the game.
This assertion is almost permanently unstable. Not only does it form the currency of certain kinds of exchanges, but with the proliferation of guns, there is also a leveling effect produced by violence. No man can prove his physical prowess and carry that as a shield. When everyone has access to guns, anyone can be “pressed” or “tested” at any time. This makes the nature of exchange on the street fundamentally different from pathways to precedence, reputation and status in other walks of life that are more sedentary and subdued. They might wish for a life of peace and prosperity, but men on the street do not entertain any romantic notions about such a life. For the men on the street mainstream “respectability” has been rendered unavailable as an economically marginalized and socially dishonored group clustered under the persona of the threatening black man. Yet, there is glory to be had in the struggle for daily existence, and dehumanized as some might be, men in the illegal economy do not lack desire or imagination. They derive their sense of honor from precedence over others equally maligned by the mainstream. It was this vision of running the block that fired Haider’s imagination, underscoring the heroism of individuals “as a normative form of personal behavior by which men with firm intentions gain honor and men of weak intentions lose it.” (Meeker 1971:157). This heroism is not romantic, at least not in the traditionally understood idea of the “heroic,” as narrative of redemption and socially valorized principles, means, and ends. Here the normative form of personal behavior is a reflection of courage and strength in relation to another. This conception does not legislate over how exactly this commitment to use of aggressive resources is actualized by men in violent actions; it does not retain a hope that Good will triumph over Bad, or think in
terms of a conception of some using instruments of aggression to defend human values against those who act thoughtlessly.

To be sure, all are invested, this is a social pursuit; but not invested in these opposed terms; they are invested in abandoning the self to instruments of aggression and aggressive energies in recognition of the nature of an uncertain life with violence at its center. This lack of a romantic conception is very much a product of this investment in personal instruments of aggression as a general commitment rather than a conception that looks at personal skills and courage as a formative feature of political experience—since the very possibility of political experience is uncertain, and commitment to instruments of aggression is exactly a response to political anarchy.

This conception is neither heroic, nor romantic. Indeed, the man of honor is often (and often must be) the “lost one,” the black body taken out of circulation from the street by the state. The lost ones are the imprisoned, swept up in the punitive regime that shreds the social and economic fabric of the urban community and manages this destruction through mass incarceration of black bodies, creating a vicious-virtuous cycle of the accumulation of various capitals.

This commitment to resources of aggression in a vulnerable, unstable life opened “a fascinating political life” (23) composed of joining and breaking with other men in similar situations. “They did not ride, that is to say, in order to secure a tranquil domestic life.” (23). Processes of capitalism that surround them are opaque and fantastic. There is paranoia about the social world, and relationship of envy to the fantasy (the American Dream), an envy as social knowledge (of one’s own exclusion from material wealth and other markers of what counts for success in one’s society). Separated from mainstream
society, left outside-looking-in, as it were, to the system of this fantastic world, they search for a voice and the imaginative possibilities offered by the attempts to create hierarchy through honor; to be political in this violent form in this social reality. And that is why the fights over honor are more than instrumental exchanges for material purposes.

**Honor – The Glory of Precedence**

The concept of honor is associated in anthropology with ethnographic studies of societies in the Mediterranean “culture area” (Bourdieu 1966; Peristiany 1966a; Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1992). As one author has noted, it “is not possible to read about honour and shame in…Mediterranean societies without making frequent mental incursions and involuntary comparisons with…school gangs, with street corner societies, etc. What do these groups have in common?” (Peristiany 1966b:11).214 Within the United States, honor has been explicitly addressed in the context of Chicano gangs where it is understood as a personal attribute, given to everyone and therefore always at risk of being lost. This distinguishes it from respect, a quality that must be earned (Jankowski 1991).215

Another author considers respect to be the “contemporary cousin” of honor (Collins

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214 His answer: “Honour and shame are the constant preoccupation of individuals in small scale, exclusive societies where face to face personal, as opposed to anonymous, relations are of paramount importance and where the social personality of the actor is as significant as his office” (11). Seventy years later, we need not be detained by the rounded and bounded conceptions of “small scale” and “exclusive.” That said, face-to-face relations of daily engagement are integral to the street.

215 According to Jankowski, in comparison to other gang members in the United States, only in the Chicano gangs was honor “the fundamental code governing their interpersonal relations” (1991:142). In other gangs, the concept of respect formed the basis of conduct in relationships with others. He distinguishes respect as an active property to be *earned*, while honor is a passive attribute, equated with dignity and given to every Chicano person, and must be *preserved*. In my analysis here, I am following the idea of respect as identified in Bourgois: a form of recognition denied by mainstream society. In its social aspect, Jankowski’s notion of respect as something to be earned also resonated with Bourgois, but the relevant social group is different (the gang in Jankowski’s case, mainstream society in Bourgois’s case). In turn, I use honor as something that is struggled over within the context of the street by individuals, already aware that they are maligned and dishonored, but seeking glory nonetheless as a marker of the possibility for a political life that is denied to them by the mainstream. In both these senses, my interpretation of these two words is different without being contradictory to Jankowski’s.
2008b), while at least one author defines honor to be “a right to respect” itself (Stewart 1994:21). Still others speak today of honor having been replaced by dignity, a right integral to every human by virtue of their humanity rather than a property or claim that is earned, sustained, or lost in social intercourse (Berger 1983; Berger et al. 1973).

Honor pertains to personal worth and social status, moral quality or precedence, a state of grace or a position of dominance, wealth or excellence. Related to self and emotion on the one hand, and to reputation and social approbation on the other, honor is polysemic and contains both social and psychological aspects. Varied conceptions of honor deriving from different realms may come into conflict with each other. For instance, the religious conception of honor as a state of grace or virtuousness may conflict with one’s personal conception as a man worthy of honor, a conception one might have to defend. Conceptions of honor and its defense might lead to otherwise questionable actions that violate not just religious, but also legal codes. At the same time, the conception of honor that has to do with personal status might allow for a man to accrue honor by achieving precedence over others, even though he might have used devious or violent means. Public opinion is always the arbiter of a man’s honor, the “public” varying according to context, place and situation. In certain societies one may claim the violation of one’s honor as a defense for violent action. However, the converse, recourse to the legal realm for pursuing one’s claim to honor, is not considered effective.

For the individual, honor is an integral property, subject to impingement and loss through one’s own conduct, that of significant kin, or through a failure to respond to an insult. It is simultaneously a personal property and a reflection of group values. In the empirical contexts of face-to-face societies the concept of honor implies mutual
recognition of the honor of another, and that is how it is transacted in daily life. The withdrawal of recognition is an act that claims to dishonor a person, and in this moment a conflict is inaugurated whose final outcome will determine whether the claim is successful or returned successfully. There are other, rather more internalized conceptions of honor as well. For instance, honor could simply mean a state of virtue as defined by the moral order of a social group, or by recourse to God. Returned to the social sphere, honor might be one’s reputation for virtue.

Honor does not operate uniformly across social classes and varies in the same regions and groups across historical periods (Santos 2012; Stewart 1994:34-41). Men with property and resources to provide for their family can establish honorability based on material independence. These same men might find that recourse to violence is the appropriate currency of honor and reputation if structural conditions leave them materially deprived (Santos 2012:esp. Ch. 6).

This chapter concerns itself with the conception of honor as glory and as precedence, that is, the competitive aspect of honor that is value neutral as far as the meritorious notion of honor as moral, civic, or professional virtue is concerned. The man of honor is the man who wins a struggle, achieves victory over another and accrues power to himself, regardless of means: “Might is the basis of right to precedence, which goes to the man who is bold enough to enforce his claim, regardless of what may be thought of his merits” (Pitt-Rivers 1968:505). This is also the conception of honor as the prize of a zero-sum game in which one must lose for another to win, recalling the image of the limited good.
At first blush, transhumant or sedentary groups in the Mediterranean, landed farmers or property-less “free men” in mid-nineteenth century Brazil, and tribes organized according to so-called segmentary principles of fission and fusion in Africa and the Middle East, feuding groups in the Mediterranean and the Near East, and men extremely sensitive to any hint of insult in saga Iceland appear to have little in common with the street corner society of men in the illegal economy of the United States. Nonetheless, there are resonances with the urban street corner as they pertain to honor. Life is characterized by certain constraints and scarcity, violence is a means of communication as well as of settling disputes, and the templates for honor include courage, strength, and a capacity for aggression. For instance, in the “oecology,” the material circumstances and constraints of existence, the street corner crews and camel herders in the desert faced objective material shortages (Black-Michaud 1975; on the scarcity of desert life also see Meeker 1970). Beyond a point, one crew could not grow its business without this growth being at the expense of another crew. The limit to the business on the street was set by the built environment, three or four corners that might attract a few more customers within the boundaries set by the municipal limit to Sleepytown on one side, and the other crews operating a few blocks away who controlled their own territory and drew their own customers. As in the “oecology” of the herding and sedentary groups in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, so in the “urban ecology” here, there were objective limits to what was available by way of material resources. Haider’s crew could grow a little, and so could Saleem and Misam’s, but eventually, they would collide if they wanted to make more money. Certainly, there were
material rewards to be had from winning a fight for turf, but they were marginal and finite.

There is an attraction to the promise of having the corner to oneself, one that fires the imagination. Even when thrown back on themselves and their street corner society, these self-respecting men could not countenance thinking of their lives in privative terms, in terms of deficiency. Instead, these organic intellectuals accurately apprehended that such accumulation strategies as might create a greater interest in wiser management of resources are not available to those who are excluded from the mainstream financial system. Most of the time, it was a day-to-day existence, locked out of the mechanisms that would make available access to full economic and financial citizenship with a bank account, a sizeable amount of savings, perhaps even a chance to invest some money. An engagement with the illegal livelihood, itself a rational choice compared with unstable, low-paid, and often degrading work in the service economy, ensured this. Controlled and dangerous substances determined their investment in a certain kind of life, one in which violence resided at the center. It entailed, on the level of the street, a “capacity to deal with and struggle with other men” (Meeker 1979:18). Within this struggle appeared fascinating possibilities of a political life.

The political system of wider society that excluded them “commonsensically” (they were perceived to not belong, and lacking an interest in participating) as well as concretely through punitive civil liabilities attenuated their participation in democratic rituals. Men on the street were constrained by an external reality they could only recognize: the fact that there was probably no scope for formal articulation or political structure within the wider political system, one that implied and entailed “disputation, co-
operation and self-interest” (Meeker 1979:150). Instead, they struggled with each other for precedence, to become the man who others follow. Further, the reality of their illegal engagement at the margins of the mainstream polity implied that violence would always be a central feature of their experience, and any political potentialities it offered. Clarity implied recognition of one’s connection to destructive resources and a willingness to abandon oneself to the use of these resources. In this way could the fascinating possibilities of one’s own life and its relation to unstable possessions, which were also political resources when aligned with violence, be opened up.216

The constraints imposed by scarcity and the uncertainty of relationships rendered these political possibilities ephemeral. Haider was soon arrested a third time, landing him in federal prison. Haider remained defiantly wedded to his self-conception. Saleem tried out for the D-league of the NFL for a short while, in order to get recruited into the NFL again. However, he was 30 years old now, and as one of the men I hung out with remarked, “they didn’t cut him because he couldn’t do it, they cut him because of his age.” Finding that avenue closed 12 years after it was his expected ticket to a life of wealth and recognition, Saleem turned to a few other trades before trying his hand at cooking—he popularized his food on Instagram, and made it available for pick up every evening. Largely supported by family and friends who drove by and picked up food in spite of erratic delivery and inconsistent quantities, he waited for business to pick up by

216 I draw inspiration here from Michael Meeker’s (1971) exploration of the role of the camel as a means of livelihood and a political instrument in Bedouin herder life. As the primary domestic possession, the camel is vulnerable and easily removed from its owner through raiding. As the mount used for raiding, the camel in turn becomes an aggressive political instrument. In this dual role, just like illegal substances and guns, the camel is the unstable form of property as well as the subject of political adventurism. Contrasted with a materially limited domestic life due to limited possibilities of settled livelihood and combined with guns and the possibility of glorious raids, the camel opened up a fascinating political life for the Bedouin herder.
word of mouth. Eventually, Saleem became a personal trainer.²¹⁷ Ali, a young and dynamic man had been making moves and was poised to establish himself on the block in their wake. He was operating in the space Saleem had used, and was cordial with Haider. A series of events soon changed this emerging dynamic.

**Young Men with Potential Vacate the Block**

I was surprised to see Nina and her friend walking over past the liquor store “LQ” and towards the first residential street in RapCity on this side. What were they here for? I recall the time she had come to drop me off, the only time she had ever ventured this side as far as I knew.²¹⁸ Doug’s avoidance of “the LQ,” the liquor store also went through my mind (“why walk when you can drive,” Stella had said; “why walk to RapCity when you can drive to Irvington” she seemed to be saying in retrospect). They both stood together at the corner, looking up at the building that had now been sealed off. Misam and a couple of others I knew were moving some things. I greeted Misam, his face and hands blackened with soot, nodded to the others, and walked over to meet Nina.

It had been a few days now, and I had been away in India. The apartment building on the corner of this block had caught fire. One side was entirely blackened. Everyone had been moved out, and pending an investigation, the building had been sealed. An American of Italian extraction owned the block of buildings that comprised the apartment and the shops in the front. He was locked in negotiations with the insurance company, and they were waiting for the apprehension of suspects or for the police and fire department to declare that the fire was accidental. Until then, there will be no payout.

²¹⁷ Recently, he has started working with some others in the food industry.
²¹⁸ For a description of this moment, see chapter 1, the section titled “An Impasse.”
from the insurance company, and there would be no restoration of the building, no return of the residents.

It was unclear what caused the fire. What most people knew was that Ali had rented a room there after he had established himself on the block, and that a lot of his boys hung out there after hours. It was a sensible thing to do, stay off the streets while having some fun at the end of the day, and it provided some refuge from the weather and the police. Also, this meant that they did not hang out in hallways or outside buildings unless necessary, which provoked, if not the ire, then at least the silent disapproval of other residents.

“Don’t get me wrong, I had a kingpin in my family you know,” Ali, in a moment of rare candor, let slip this detail about the circle of family beyond his mother and aunt. Our conversation had drifted towards “the game,” although in general I had let him know that I had a greater interest in his personal life and outlook than any potentially illegal activities he might be involved in. We had begun to talk about his relation to the older heads on the corner, and how they accepted or dealt with his presence on the block where ten months back, he had been absent. Having spent some time describing his family and childhood, and speaking of things other than the bravado and macho image everyone had to project when downstairs on the street, perhaps he felt vulnerable for a moment at having shared such personal details of his life. Perhaps this feeling made him compensate, let slip a detail about the kind of powerful, menacing people in his background precisely when he slipped into a moment of vulnerable candor so that I would not get the idea that he was weak in any way. Ali needed to assert himself, lest I
get the wrong idea, he needed to let an outsider know something about him that others knew already.

I often referred to him as the “son of boxers.” His father was a boxer, and so was his mother. This was important for Ali, leaner than many other muscular men on the corner, and not as tall as many others. But “I hit hard,” he emphasized. He also asserted that he was “out here,” in the game of doing some things on the margins of the law, things that required courage and bravery to risk not just falling foul of the police, but of others who were on the margins of the law as well. Ali had the ability for vigilance, strength and violence in being out here, but his assertion was to ensure that I understood that Ali was not really out here all the way. “This is recreational shit man, we know that if we keep on this, there is only two places we gon’ end up – dead, or in prison.” He was not just saying that to me, as someone from another world; Ali regularly worked one mainstream job or the other. When I met him first, he was working as a forklift operator for a coffee company, loading and unloading the cargo at the airport. But there was something about the street that attracted him, apart from some quick money.

His friend Deron was the regular presence on the corner, in the area that Saleem had more or less vacated. Ali came by in the afternoons and evenings. He told me that as for all the older players here (older in age and in time they had been out on the street), “we respect them and all, but we out here now.” He had a rather calm view about the possibility of competition with the likes of Haider, Saleem and Misam, and also a placid respect for them. Given Haider’s ongoing troubles with the law and Saleem’s inability to hold his own, Ali seemed poised to transition into a significant presence on the block. Momentarily, he was: Haider had just been absurdly arrested a third time, and Saleem
was on his way out of the game. Eventually, the fire in the apartment obliterated whatever possibilities there were of a new leader emerging on the street.

One rumor that emerged some time later was that one of the young men who would briefly take over the corner had caused the fire in a moment of intoxicated carelessness. No one could be sure whether this was true. In any case, once the building burned, everyone had to go away from the neighborhood for a while. The police presence was heavy on the streets for the next few days, coming around and making their presence felt, and a few of the young men were detained for questioning. Eventually, for the next two years, the case remained inconclusive, the building remained closed, and Nina and her friend never returned to RapCity next door.

The main outcome of this moment, as far as the tenuous, emerging new balance of forces on the street was concerned, was the unhinging of this balance again. Ali had to leave because “burning someone’s home… people send you to jail for that shit.” Even though Jalal (the youth widely tipped as having started the fire) tried to take his place, it was not going to be the same. Ali had charisma and a sense for managing relationships that Jalal simply did not.

It was never clear if Jalal played up, or at least allowed to circulate freely, the story that he had caused the fire because he thought it added to his menace or credibility (as an arsonist?) on the street. In general Jalal was not hesitant to shout his own name out. He would cross the street extra slowly, making cars wait for him while the light was

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[219] In general, even low income residents and neighbors who were not involved in anything happening on the street abided by the rule of silence in the face of representatives of institutions external to the neighborhood, such as the police. However, losing one’s home to fire went beyond the scope of this general understanding between the residents and the street entrepreneurs. If a resident had spoken out to the police, it would not be appreciated but nonetheless expected and accepted.
green, shaking his finger and letting them know they could not rush him, “nah nah, not in my hood.” He would be too loud, telling whoever would listen he was on “two sticks and a perk” (i.e. taking two different prescriptions pills), and generally be obnoxious and draw attention. His friends would bear it; strangers would keep a straight face and keep their distance. It was moot soon, this bravado and show of an unclear, tenuous, and barely achieved status as a man on the street. Jalal was incarcerated in less than a year, which, given his conduct while on the street, was an outcome most were not unhappy with and none were surprised by. He became a hash tag on Instagram, the photo sharing smartphone application: #freeJalal. He had not burned bright enough or long enough, his self-proclaimed willingness to do anything (burn a building, make cars stop) dissipating before it could become congealed and known.

Marginal Black Men: Pride of the Socially Dishonored

On the margins of capitalist economy and society, near yet remote from the bright lights of New York City, a group of men work out their lives and their status as men. The man raising his fist in the face of social and moral opprobrium and the threat of death or incarceration, callously defiant, is “the realest nigger,” the man of honor. He is also the “lost one,” perhaps must be a lost one in an extreme manifestation of the search for glory on the margins.

Interpreting the story developed here about the exchanges between Saleem and Haider and other men on the street corner, I used the concepts of scarcity and honor (and subthemes therein) as interpretive keys. This cross-cultural application derives from studies of groups in a harsh ecology that imposes an uncertain and unpredictable
existence. Total scarcity, where it obtains to cover most members of a society, contains the necessity for co-operation and conflict in equal measure, and leadership emerges from structured and instrumental exchanges of violence that are conducted within certain limits to protect material resources from unsustainable destruction that might place the survival of the whole system in jeopardy. Honor in such groups offers a nonrealistic realm for the escalation of conflicts without endangering the viability of the social group as a whole. Social control arises from competitive but norm-bound exchanges of aggression in which leaders emerge and co-operation, conflict and leadership amount to a social system.

When using these keys in advanced capitalist society with a centralized state apparatus (although the effectiveness of this apparatus may be questioned in the urban community, though not of the brutally present power of its punitive presence) and not subject to the condition of total scarcity, differences in empirical context need to be integrated. Hardly a society of total scarcity, being in the U.S. context means black men live in scarcity while surrounded by a society, and images of a society, that claims to be abundant and rewarding. The mainstream serves as the backdrop of what success might mean, but does not offer to everyone concrete opportunities to compete for that success to everyone. While opportunities in mainstream, legal employment are unavailable at anything other than the lower end of the wage scale in degrading settings that offer little opportunity of fulfilling engagement, even the hustle on the street has finite potential for economic advancement. My interlocutors confirmed that what I described as the “Jay-Z moment” of the late 1980s and 1990s, when enterprising men from “socially isolated” neighborhoods combined a set of occupations that may include multiple forms of

\[\text{On socially isolated neighborhood see William Julius Wilson (1987); see Ralph 2014 for a considered critique.}\]
entrepreneurial activity in entertainment, informal economy and even well-invested social relationships to make money and eventually “go legit” as a self employed entrepreneur—was over.

The existence of scarcity in this relative sense heightens the subjective understanding of one’s relative position. Perhaps this makes it even worse than in a society where everyone faces total scarcity and all subscribe to the image of the limited good. Given this difference in scale—an advanced capitalist society not subject to objective total scarcity while members of it experience this scarcity in relation to the rest of society—it is not necessary for co-operation and conflict to interact in equal measure, mediated by the element of leadership.221 The material rewards of precedence on the street appear as some markers of an attenuated form of achievement, the Dream hollowed out, as it were: looking “fresh,” or having just enough money to spend lavishly for an hour or two everyday, but with no sustainable process for having and perpetuating them.

There seems little incentive to develop complex daily forms of co-operation between men when the prospects of growth and success are so limited. The political rewards of a struggle between each other appear equally denuded. In this “distorted” setting, I use the concepts of moral and material scarcity and the idea of a struggle for glory to evoke the apprehension of life by a marginal group at the edge of a wealthy, ostensibly egalitarian, democratic and individualistic social system.

221 In fact, this situation even facilitates the shortage of co-operation at the level of the street. A few men lament why the corner is run this way, where three crews and a few independent men try to make their livelihood at risk from the law, from each other, and from those operating beyond the corner. Otis and Gamal often opined that with a little more co-operation, they could run this corner much better, and more like a virtuously accumulating business. The men could pool their resources, give two or three men the job of working “shifts” on the street, let all customers be funneled towards them and split the revenues periodically. This would reduce the wastage of intra-street completion and the loss of people and the costs of encounters with the police, courts and prisons. At the same time, they all readily conclude that such a situation is unlike to come about.
We see this in the conflict between Haider and Saleem. While Haider certainly “defeated” Saleem by recruiting members of his crew, besting him in a dispute over stolen goods and resulting violence, and gradually destroying Saleem’s viability as a member of the neighborhood street groups, Haider himself was always already defeated. He lived in a society that accorded little legitimacy to his person, his ability to plan and strategize, or his personal strength in bringing together and maintaining a group involved in economic and social activities. Unlike amongst the Bedouin (for instance), the violence here in the neighborhood did not become political, did not produce hierarchy and a structure of relative (albeit ephemeral) stability, because ultimately the group of men on the street corner was part of a wider society invested in containing their position on the margins, and periodically swept up leaders from this group, leaving it in a state of perpetual fragmentation and violent flux. A black criminal, Haider was always the waste of the system, liable to be removed from the street and processed through the waste management system of the courts and prisons. Indeed, this was the end result, in many ways, of the life he led. He saw it as such, and according to some, perhaps even desired a life in prison. Haider seemed to have almost willed or demanded his re-incarceration.

Consider the absurdity of his final arrest after which he went away for a long time: New Jersey Transit police detained him for rolling a blunt of marijuana on the train. He knew well that any arrest would lead to such an outcome, as he had already violated probation and bail, with two arrests since his return from prison. It is unfathomable to me that this was an unguarded moment, given his permanent state of vigilance and paranoia, and his undoubted awareness that he was on the brink. It was almost as if, as William said when I
wondered aloud why Haider would do something so brazen and absurd, “probably cos’ he prefers [life in prison].”

And yet, on the street, his removal solidified his status as the “realest nigger,” a currency that yields little value in the system he lives under, but somehow was the realest value he could pursue. Becoming a lost one affirmed his “success” in the life he accurately recognized as the one possible for him, and the one that he lived to its pinnacle. He had a vision of glory and he realized it, in the adventures of strategic manipulation and maneuvering against Saleem and aggressive use of his energies abandoned to instruments of aggression, a short-lived moment of victory on the street that was his arena, his turf, even though it was always likely to be taken away through his removal and incarceration. This contradiction, between achievement at one level and its outcomes at another, exemplifies the impossible situation of the black man who wants to live with honor and self-respect, but is not afforded the means to do so in a capitalist social system with its emphasis on certain forms of achievement, also regularly denied to certain groups. This is not a tragedy, but a functional outcome of capitalism.

I do not know how long the narrative of Haider will persist on the street. Even though he was in jail again, he was already one of the lost ones to locals of a certain age. But the next group, the “young boys you can’t tell anything these days,” might not remember or know him in the same way. They would not work with those who knew him, given the corner had no leadership of that age anymore. They would not learn a story or two about him during those longest periods of the day when men stood around, waiting for something to happen. It was in these moments that the men were sent, on a day when the sun was bright and danger a little distant, into collective reveries about the
time when they were growing up, when the adventure was in front of them. Now those moments arrived rarely, because the men were not together anymore. Another “graduating class” was taking their places, and this class was looking forward to its own adventure, the same but a different one. They stood around differently, they had not yet imbibed the discipline of the street. They were louder in the day, exuberant, still surging with an uncontrolled energy that promised that they were to take over the world, get that thing they wanted, win.

**Departure**

I’m thinking of moving out, Sheila told me. We were sitting on top of the steps leading up to her house, a shared two-story structure where she lived on the second floor. She reminisced about going to work on Finley Road, for a doctor who was married to a psychologist. “There? None of this. None of it. Its so different.” She showed me the rental application for apartments somewhere in Orange. She also recommended Linden and Rahway as reasonable places. She went on:

This place has changed so much from when I moved here [five years ago]. You know, I would not worry going to the store at night, I knew everybody. There are too many strangers out here these days, and these young boys. They don’t know how to act, their favorite is the “F” word, and they are now doing all these things. And they are in your building, selling stuff, you don’t know what they might get into, and you will get caught in the middle of that. Even in my house three months ago these new neighbors moved in, and they have so much going on all the time. Finally, Sheila had to go inside, and I crossed the street to my apartment.

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222 For instance, while I had been taught and learned promptly to never stand with my back to the street and a few other niceties of bodily positioning and vigilance while on the block, Javion and his boys did not seem to follow such rules. Even when working during the daytime, they did not try to keep a low profile. Strangers walked through the street without notice or comment, and doubtless it was one of these men that had robbed Javion and Jalal.
“These baggies ain’t mine,” said Javion with no hint of surprise, curiosity, or concern when I glanced at the pack of small plastic pouches lying on the stairs in my apartment building and looked towards him. I was surprised at his lack of interest in the “baggies,” and given the fact that a stickup man had recently robbed them, his lack of alarm too. The game ran on a clear delineation of spots and areas that people tried to claim and hold in relation to each other. The place where one did business (the spot or corner or area of the street, and in this case the apartment building foyer and stairs) was a resource, one claimed with a degree of care and held with an even greater degree of vigilance. The corner was divided like that. One side off of the laundromat, one spot below my apartment building, two spots along the line of stores of which Rajinder owned one, another spot for a single independent dealer across the street, and finally a little place under the trees beyond the bus stop for everyone to relax in the evening if one was of a mind to, just far enough back from the street to create a feeling of safety and refuge while offering a view of the activity around.

They had recently begun to work from inside the little foyer of the building leading up to the first floor apartments, and given that the other spots on the block were also in a state of flux because of Haider’s arrest; Saleem’s abdication; a recent attempt on Haider’s brother’s life (which he must have “taken care of” by now, according to Sheila, but which also meant he was not parked in his car below the apartment building everyday as he used to be); the departure of a depressed and discouraged Gamal; the absence, after a fleeting presence, of Ali and his two friends; the desiccated presence of Misam and his boy recently returned from prison; and the intermittent appearance and disappearance back to his apartment of Otis. Given all this, the presence of a pouch of baggies in his
spot should have aroused more curiosity in Javion. Who did they belong to? Did someone else intend to use this place for refilling retail supplies, even selling them? How did this stranger plan to work here if Javion and Jalal already thought this was their spot, their shop? The apartment building needed to be protected, marked and asserted ownership over. You cannot run a shop if title is not clear, and people will not come to the shop if they are not sure you have the area secured.

My brow was furrowed, but Javion’s was not, so I let the conversation drift to other things: how his brother was, how his father was doing. I knew there was no reason for me to ask if he was worried the baggies might belong to someone unknown, because this question should have already been in the air. Perennially a little “high on his own supply,” Javion did not find the presence of these threatening baggies irksome. For me on the other hand, this was a signal.

The men I had come to know were not here anymore like they were before. Haider ran the corner not just for himself, but also for those who lived there, including me. The men I knew and could trust to keep the neighborhood relatively safe for all of us were either in jail, or in other occupations elsewhere. I did not know or trust in the ability of the new young men on the block to maintain enough stability here so I could go about my life with a relatively predictable expectation of what the day might bring. While active data collection had concluded, I had continued to live in RapCity, the first place in the United States I could call home. In the time I scaled back participant-observation, my active engagement with the affairs of the street, a new graduating class had begun their time under the sun on the street. For me, now it was time to leave.
Conclusion: “Should I tell you my Government?”

In writings on political institutions there is a good deal of discussion about the nature and the origin of the State, which is usually represented as being an entity over and above the human individuals who make up a society, having as one of its attributes something called 'sovereignty', and sometimes spoken of as having a will (law being often defined as the will of the State) or as issuing commands. The State, in this sense, does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction of the philosophers.

[Radcliffe-Brown 1940:xiii]

"Ok, so what should I do if the cops stop me on the Ave?" I asked William after a conversation about “the train” (police cars) coming through, as it did two-three times a day. William’s advice was succinct and definitive: “Participate.”

From alternative conceptions of the political in chapter 5, I turn here to the conventional theater of politics. This conclusion tries to end by opening another conversation, on the subject of the state. At the start of the dissertation I claimed that the subjects of this research were not marginal to the economy, but in its umbilicus, its very core. The experiences and meaning making devices and processes engaged in this dissertation also allow us to address the state, that which is without an ontology, that which is closely linked with the economy. It seems to me that in their own ways, members of the COS, Otis and those in his circle, and Saleem and Haider all saw through the mask, the fetish of the state (Silverblatt 2007). They enacted their own conceptions of the political, and in turn, show us how the state is enacted on either side of the invisible door.

In the face of the persistent unviability of treating the state as a concrete entity, studies of the state have concerned themselves with seeing “how the state becomes a social subject in everyday life” (Aretxaga 2003:393). In the same spirit as financialization
is articulated in this dissertation, I am going in the other direction for the state as well, which is to ask *in what way the state is made by my interlocutors*. Rather than continue with the unidirectional process of examining what the impact of the illusory entity called the state is on its members, it may be useful to shift anxiety from a subjective condition towards considering how it translates back into the making of the state. Instead of treating anxiety as an effect of the state, I argue here that my interlocutors, in their “states of anxiety,” enact the anxious state.

**The State**

With the massive bailout of financial institutions, the state’s essential role in creating the conditions for a neoliberal market was confirmed. Not only that, as the Federal Reserve turned into the “lender of last resort,” there could be little doubt about the mutual imbrication of the state and the market. It was the state that declared a crisis, the state sponsored bailout that headed off further unraveling of the financial market, heralding the stagnation we came to know as the Great Recession. The bailout centered the state as an actor. The declaration of a financial crisis was a performative moment (Austin 1961, 1962; Callon 2007; MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie et al. 2007; Searle 1969). With the bailout, the state enacted the process of “translation” (Callon 1986a:24-28; also see Callon 1986b), setting off a series of processes the linked entities in a specific way, a course of action that moved processes of financial markets into the realm of the state. This moment of translation allowed one phenomenon (crisis) to become the other (bailout).
The State as an ensemble of practices

Yet, the debate over the exact nature of the state enters a different realm. Is it a concrete, bounded entity, and if so, one that is separable from other spheres such as society and economy? Or is it an idea, or worse, an illusory concept with no empirical content (Abrams 1977; Mitchell 2006; Radcliffe-Brown 1940) that nonetheless continues to appear as an autonomous entity, standing apart if not above the economy and society? The precise delimitation of the state has exercised scholars in various disciplines, and many have pointed to a certain absence at the center of the notion of the state, once it is examined closely.

The ‘democratic state form’ (for lack of a better term) and its characteristic processes have become globalized since World War II, with many decolonized countries adopting them, and dictatorial or totalitarian regimes being described in the negative with reference to the absence of such processes. Today this mitigates the import of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown’s concern at the time, that political concepts developed on the basis of a limited number of societies and economies were inadequate for the study of “simpler societies” (Radcliffe-Brown 1940:xiii). The question he posed (and answered)—about the actual presence of something that may be marked as the state, drawn a boundary around and delineated from other human affairs and institutions, and hence made available to animate this category—is also apparently put to rest; the state persists as a category of social analysis, contrary to his recommendation. Not without persisting doubt, however. His assessment that the idea of the state creates mystification bears

223 The Weberian rational-legal state marked by the monopoly of violence over a define territory, the separation of powers into judiciary, legislative and executive, the rule of law, co-called ‘liberal democracy’ including the right to vote, et cetera.
scrutiny. The recommended alternatives to the state—politics and government—have been taken up as objects of study, although probably as words with meanings substantially different from Radcliffe-Brown’s conception of them.

The problem—that the idea of the state flounders when it comes to determining what exactly the state is—was formulated trenchantly by Philip Abrams (1977). Concluding that probing deeper into political practice did not reveal the state, Abrams proposed a separation of the state into the state-system and the state-idea. For Abrams, that there was no such thing as a state made remarkable the persistent search for such a thing, and he attributed this search to the powerful existence of the state-idea. The idea of the state is what persuaded analysts to treat political and governmental institutions as the evidence of a state, and these analyses could proceed without always assimilating them back to the category of the state, or probing it. It was the idea of the state that allowed for the legitimation of processes of subjection, mystifying their origins and concealing their history. “The real official secret… is the secret of the non-existence of the state” (77). The state achieves a symbolic identity with political practice, and then becomes a largely illusory account of that practice, which in turn become the sum total of what may be understood as the state. To this extent the idea of the state serves an ideological function, of being a construct that appears to lend clarity and discreteness to processes that actually proliferate well beyond any assumed boundaries. For Abrams, moving past this entails abandoning the idea of the state as a subject of analysis and instead addressing a “perceptible feature of institutionalised political power, the state-system” (79).

There is some convergence between this idea of mystification and the Marxian assessment of the ideology of the state as a misrepresentation of the process of class
domination through the use of institutional arrangements such as government and law. Marxist analysis understands the state first and foremost as a bourgeois institution under capitalism, an apparatus for integration that represents its particular interests as the general interest of all, and promulgates seemingly neutral laws that perpetuate and integrate exploitative class relations in society (Marx and Engels 1998). The COS arrived at and stayed with a similar conclusion: The state is a tool of the “bosses”’ domination over the working class. However, Abrams contends that a Marxian analysis of the ideological nature of the state and its use as an instrument of legitimation of class exploitation nonetheless leaves intact the notion that there indeed is such a thing as the state, an entity that obfuscates its own origins and true nature.

Accounting for the history of the “state” in social science in the United States, interestingly it was the emergence of postcolonial nation-states that first scuttled the idea of studying the state (Mitchell 2006:171-172). Along with the ideological nature of the term that confused its exact referent, studies of the state were confounded by the multiplicity of political processes, groups, and institutions in newly emerging nation-states which effectively belied any assumptions about a bounded object of study that is separate or separable from society. I argue that something similar is happening here, when we turn our attention not to institutional systems and processes and their effects as Mitchell recommends, but go right down to the ground, to the umbilicus where the state is enacted by those who have pierced through the fetish character of the state-idea.

Eventually, according to Mitchell, the return of the state in social science was facilitated by the replacement of the concept of political systems and the creation of a distinction between state and society corresponding to the distinction between an empirical realm (society) and a conceptual realm (state). The state was then “presented as an autonomous entity whose actions were not reducible to or determined by forces in society… [these approaches] typically grasped the state as a system of decision making” (173-174).
Mitchell proposed a way out of this impasse regarding the concrete reality (or lack thereof) and the actual effects of the state through a study of institutional mechanisms and their ramifications, and how the operation of these mechanisms simultaneously produce the effect of a coherent unity called the state. In fact, “producing and maintaining the distinction between state and society is itself a mechanism that generates resources of power” (175). This distinction was an essential element in the declaration of a crisis, and the rhetorical configuration of the bailout as a procedure built on the appropriation of “taxpayer money.” “The appearance that state and society or economy are separate things is part of the way a given financial and economic order is maintained (175).” The state, then, is not entity but arrangement(s), not system but process(es), not cause but outcome(s), outcomes that in turn generate other effects.

Next is the by-now familiar move to discipline; a move from a central, external, constraining force to a decentralized, internal, and productive discipline, that produces individuals and their actions. At the level of the aggregate, larger scale methods operate on a new object—population—and are grouped under, or designated as “government.” Developing Foucault’s analysis further, Mitchell seeks to answer the question of how these decentralized and internal processes eventually and nevertheless create the appearance of a structure, of the state standing above society. The state is the sum of the structural effects produced by a variety of disciplinary practices that create simultaneously a two-dimensional effect of their operation: as a set of techniques, and as a set of institutions from which these techniques emanate.

Although Marxist analyses, according to both Mitchell and Abrams, fail to account for the appearance of the state as an autonomous entity (attributing this to an
ideological effect), they do generate evidence for the interlocking of class and state interests contrary to assertions that there is no relation between this structural effect and the “capitalist nature of modernity” (Mitchell 2006:181). The contention of “anti-structure genealogists” such as Mitchell is that both labor and political practice produce abstractions—capital or exchange value, and the state—that stand apart from material reality. Another claim relates to the emergence of the economy as a distinct sphere, subject to a similar historical process that posits it as a distinct object, while this is in fact a structural effect; a transition that produces the effect of the appearance of the economy as a concrete realm, while the state appears again as an abstract structure standing apart from it. However, the economy has evolved in the post-industrial period with a proliferation of ideational and representational aspects, especially in the realm of finance, (increasingly accompanied by the objective “virtual”). It is this immateriality, this absence, that resonates with the collage of experiences provided in the main body of this dissertation. The collage was an interpretation of the crisis, but is also an interpretation of the relation to the state, and this relation is opened in the conclusion here. Given that the economy replaced “population” (an enumerative category) as the object of politics, one

225 In passing, this is starkly manifested in the route from the street to prison. The “rationalization” or managerial approach taken to both the administration of unemployment support and the running of the prison system have been processes couched in the language of efficiency, and cost-benefit glossed with the rhetoric of deserving poor and victims’ rights. We see a viciously felicitous combination of what Löic Wacquant has aptly termed the combination of the “invisible hand” of the market with the “‘iron fist’ of the penal state” (2008a:15). Both the invisible hand and the iron fist together and independently demonstrate an intermingling of multiple logics. The market principle of competition forms the backdrop to the shift from welfare to workfare and is buttressed by a policy and political rhetoric of personal responsibility and the deserving poor, while the iron hand of the punitive state works intertwined with private enterprise prison management as well as use of captive labor at miniscule wage. This is the backdrop to the situation experienced by Haider, and apprehended as such by him. His arrest amounted to a defiant refusal to accept any of the expectations placed on him by the naturalized market and the law-based criminal justice system. See Wacquant’s extensive work on the prison, the ghetto, and the interlocking of the two in the creation and management of insecurity in the post-industrial period (what I have accounted for in this dissertation in relation to financialization and its culmination in a crisis) (2001a, b, 2008a, 2010a, b, 2014).

226 Indulge this characterization of scholars influenced by the work of Michel Foucault.
might note again a conception of the political in democracy that asks the question about “those who are outside the count” (Ranciere 2004:5).

In any case, these analyses and probings of the putative state help clear a ground. There is a risk of such observations becoming a point of dissipation. It is not my intent to identify a disciplinary apparatus or the operation of power on the street corner. Neither is there any intent here to identify a proliferation of technologies of subjectivation and the production of subjection. A capillary analysis of power runs the risk of voiding the subject, and certainly the risk that eventually one cannot identify the interest behind a tactic of the state, a strategy of discipline, or a technique of power any more. This creates the danger of falling prey to what appears a description of micro-powers that looks uncomfortably like a unitary conception instead. Or one could slide into the condition of multiplying information (Luhmann 1990 in Roitman 2014). Instead, I am simply claiming the phenomenological existence of one enactment of the state, one multiple performance, in this place with the invisible door.

**Government**

Financialization in its top-down, expert conception has been treated in this dissertation as voiding the economy of meaning, making things incomprehensible. It is an impossibility of attaining of meaning. Financialization is not just an economic process, but a modality of the economy that permeates social life in a manner that is opaque and largely incomprehensible, such that the gyrations of financial markets are apprehended as

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227 It is a source of bemusement that whenever the ideas of the state and economy are discussed in relation to globalization, they are always projected outwards. The implicit subjects at “the margins of polities and global economies” (Aretxaga:396) who desire a good state and struggle for full citizenship are always elsewhere. The rise of “phantom states” and their association with “an increasingly spectral neoliberal economy” (402) is always elsewhere. Why not here?
upheavals without a clear source and lacking outcomes that can be guarded against subjectively. It is a process that supposedly produces anxiety in those included in financial markets and a smug but nervous apprehension from those who are “unbanked,” economic subjects who are not participating in virtual finance but are sources of capital for it nonetheless. However, the subjects of this research give meaning to financialization through experience. They produce multiple meanings, none of which arise through the conceptual machine of financialization itself.

“Should I tell you my government?” This conflation of one’s real name with the agent of the state, is incredible. The name given by family is hidden with care, and this hiding is second nature to everyone on the street. The practical reasons for this are self-evident; it is better for one’s name to not be known on the street because it is registered with the state, it is on some paper somewhere in an office. To be identifiable in this way increases vulnerability to being reported to the police, to other entities in the criminal justice system. Lest it appear that only “criminals” hide their government, it is important to note that this is a generalized norm, a customary approach to such details about oneself. It also seeps into other forms of communicative exchange, friendly, personal, or otherwise.228 Being detained for pursuing illegitimate economic activities (or for any other reason) would in turn lead to punitive outcomes from other institutional processes of government, including social safety entitlements, and the very basic right of participation in democratic process as a voter. The outcome of one’s “government” being seen in this way would be to lose statuses that allow one to be “governable,” to be viable as a citizen.

228 There is a sense of this reserve in the section on anxious reciprocity and suspicious exchange in chapter 2.
Misam, Haider, and others like them are not at the margins of the economy, not at all. They are very much economic actors, they earn and spend every day. Further, they are also lucrative to capital. The profit of the black man on the street corner may not be taxable, but his incarceration is profitable. He conjures speculative investment. Capital moves virtually through either side of this invisible door. It is slippery, as when a crisis the members of the Block Association in chapter 1 did little to produce wiped out their investment and mortgage values. Capital it is also sticky, because every black body in jail generates money, and generates political capital. As Saleem said, “we are in a fishbowl.” At any time, the police may come and find someone to arrest, to imprison. The source of these capitals is stuck in place.\(^{229}\) The exclusion is not economic, even though financialization is largely opaque to middle class homeowners and largely irrelevant for those in the street economy. They are very much part of the economic order, through the operations of what may be considered the market (although I have discussed here how these boundaries between economy, state, and society are not clear), and the actions of what may be considered the coercive arm of the state (with the same caveat about the exact presence of the state as an entity). It is elsewhere that marginality and exclusion operate. Because you work in the illicit economy, because you fight, it is better to relegate yourself, take yourself “outside the count.” To not want “government” to be known speaks to an absence of recognition from the very government that one is hiding from.\(^{230}\)

\(^{229}\) I take the idea of sticky and slippery capital from Markusen 1996.

\(^{230}\) I return here to the logic of witchcraft. The absence or failure of recognition (and to be sure, there is a refusal of the recognition—as a criminal, a thug, a superpredator—that is offered or enforced) from the state implies again the impossibility of constituting oneself. Otis and Haider find that no recognition issues from the state or from society, at least none which they can accept, in which they can recognize themselves.
Violence

[A] state is that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a certain territory, this 'territory' being another of the defining characteristics of the state...The state is held to be the sole source of the 'right' to use violence. [Weber 1994:310-311]\(^{231}\)

The most austere conception of statehood remains its identification with the legitimate monopoly over the use of violence or coercion in a society. Weber’s lens could potentially implicate every state as a failed state, once seen from the perspective not just of private security forces or “war economies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia” (Aretxaga 2003:394), but from the perspective of Haider and Saleem. The question is one of legitimacy: is the state “held to be” the sole source of this right, or does it, in its neoliberalization and failure to care for certain groups and citizens, face the attenuation of this legitimacy? To the extent that Haider accurately perceived his position in relation to the state and its political-administrative structures, he refused the legitimacy of the state that claims a monopoly, and in response enacted his own conception of the political on this corner, his corner of the boulevard.

Even William, Demaine, Isaac, and so many others who are not “on the street” or “in the game” are subject to the racialized, transparent recognition of criminality, the “mystifying force of the law” (Derrida in Aretxaga:405) “a state [that is] a law that is in force without signifying” (Agamben in Aretxaga: 405) The fiction of the state, as well as the remote opacity of the economy, combine to produce the phenomenological experience of a malevolence without provenance. As Aretxaga notes in relation to the

\(^{231}\) A slightly different translation appears in the edited volume prepared by Hans Geinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills: a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. Note that 'territory' is one of the characteristics of the state... The state is considered the sole source of the 'right' to use violence (Weber et al. 1946:78). I prefer the use of “is held to be” over “is considered the” because it more readily brings to mind the notion of an idea of legitimacy that is “held” by people. It is also then a perception that, so to speak, “may not hold.”
violence of pure performativity in which the law simply affirms itself in a tautological form… [when] Emptied of content, the violence of law, as sovereign power, becomes ghostly and persecutory” (2003:405-406), the state takes on a spectral character. Even though the violence of the law, of the sovereign power is embodied in the figure of the police, and the courts and prisons of the criminal justice system, they appear without source, without cause and as accident to whoever gets caught in the net on the corner of the boulevard on any given day.

From the occasional flashes of their presence, to the perennial threat constituted by their temporary absences, to the intimate encounters “close to the skin” (Aretxaga 2003:396), whatever we might call the state is strangely familiar and close to Otis. He hides his government, operates in secrecy. The police secretly sneak up on him. Both operate in a mutual fear, they know each other intimately and yet do not know each other and invent fictions. The government hides until it suddenly flashes in front of him, and he hides his government. They both disavow their origin, a core that is unknown to either. They fetishize each other (Taussig 1992a, 1999). He is the subject of a paranoiac narrative, and enacts a paranoiac narrative of his own (Aretxaga 2003:397, 399, 402), and it is closer to reality than it might appear at first brush. “They are trying to kill us!” (Taussig 1998; Taussig 1992b).

While it is close, it also seems to be the source of death, not only or even primarily in the physical sense, but in the sense alluded to in chapter 2 and here as

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232 This dissertation has not addressed itself to the concept of the nation. Here I only note in passing the possible significance of the insider-outsider distinction to the status of black men who are outside legitimate economic citizenship. In the fearful public discourse around black males, it is unclear whether they are insiders being made into scapegoated outsiders, or whether they are an element of what the state imagines to be the nation but nonetheless destroys in the search for absolute control.
something in the reflection of which Otis and others do not see themselves reflected in any adequate way. This failure of recognition that issues from the state fills daily life with a sense of menace. It may be that the state produces an enemy, a criminal because it seems to possess a force that the state would like to appropriate (Aretxaga 2003, Siegel 1998). A phantasy and projection might be at play here. However, on the basis of the narratives fashioned by Otis and his circle, I contend that it is not just the state that brings into effect a fantasy in relation to the black male, finding in him a power that it seeks to have and destroying him to recover it; it is also that through his own imaginative constructions to organize what is happening, Otis enacts the state.

Recognizing the difference between us, William told me to “participate” in the state, because I could. Unmarked and simply a curiosity in this place, I was not transparently recognizable as a criminal (Cacho 2012). His definitive answer also conveyed what he does when he is stopped by the police; he participates. That is the only option available to him, and commonly the only arena in which he is brought into the realm of the state, via the surveillance apparatus that amounts to the state on the sidewalk. William works, and pays taxes, but the state remains inchoate and inaccessible to him. He voted occasionally, but did not draw any significant meaning from this participation. He tries different narratives, joining with Otis but breaking from him, joining the church but living in sin.

It is ultimately the collage of the juxtaposed and conflicting negotiations between the State, ‘government’ and violence that forces the reader to move beyond simplistic prescriptions of ‘black crime’, and truly look at the invisible door. And then perhaps realize that the door is not (only) a space but a lens: a prism through which the
imbrications of personal meanings render abstract categories not only perceptible, but simply more meaningful…
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