

P R E F A C E

Crossing 96th Street

I STILL RETAIN a New York City adolescent's sense of boundaries. Taking the First Avenue bus uptown to interview former gang members in East Harlem, I found myself watching the cross streets carefully after we got to 96th Street. I had ventured into alien territory, something I never would have done as a teenager. Well beyond the turf in which I and my friends felt comfortable, 96th Street divided Spanish Harlem from the rest of the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and in my youth I took such boundaries seriously.

I remember one winter's afternoon, standing near the corner of "our" block, 88th Street between Second and Third Avenues, when my friends and I came face to face with a group of Puerto Rican kids. They had probably come from East Harlem, and their turn from Third Avenue onto our street was a blatant challenge, for boys did not wander accidentally into strange neighborhoods in groups. I recall that we eyed each other for what felt like an eternity, and then our group stepped aside and let them pass. I can no longer recollect what words were spoken, although there were some, nor do I remember discussing what happened with my friends. I do recall my rage and humiliation, watching them glide down the block, knowing that their superiority, their presence, had been affirmed, just as ours had been negated.

My friends and I formed a street-corner group, common enough in working- and lower-middle-class New York. We inherited the block from an older group that had been broken up by the draft, work, steady girl-

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friends, and, for one or two, college. They had been the Bad Ones and so we became the Little Bad Ones, at least for a summer, after which I don't think we were called anything at all. Building superintendents routinely chased us from their "stoops" (stairs leading from the street up to the door); young women walked a gauntlet between two lines of hard, staring eyes and endured occasional catcalls; the deli owner guarded his beer case when we came in; and our late-night rowdiness sometimes resulted in a phone call to the local precinct house. But in the tradition of street-corner groups, we kept our block safe from outsiders, and crime, aside from our own petty delinquencies, was largely nonexistent. When we left the block as a group, it was to play ball against the walls of a massive brewery on a nearby street that separated us from the far tougher Irish kids to our immediate north. To the west and south stretched Silk Stocking Manhattan, where boys did not hang out on street corners, carried tennis rackets rather than stickball bats, and swam at the boys' club instead of the East River. It is a measure of New York's parochialism that all of my friends, except one, were Catholic; of German, Irish, Italian, or Polish descent; and the children of postal workers, cooks, domestics, and small shopkeepers. To us, Jews, Protestants, African Americans, Asians, and Latinos all belonged to exotic other species and lived in New Yorks distant from our own, even if only a few city blocks away. To a passing sociologist, we might have looked like a gang defending the insularity of our world. But we were not: we lacked a key element in defining a gang, which is engaging in a pattern of conflict. Unlike a gang, we allowed others to walk down our block.

In writing this book about street gangs and masculinity in postwar New York, I have often thought of the meaning of that winter afternoon's meeting and the confrontation that never materialized. What I did not understand at the time now seems abundantly clear: we backed down from a fight because we could afford to. While none of us was wealthy, or even modestly middle-class, our parents paid parochial school tuitions and imbued us with aspirations of going to college. Even those of us from single-parent or female-headed households had models of masculinity available who were rooted in a world of work, family sacrifice, and obligation. At the same time, we enjoyed the freedom of the city. We did not live in an area teeming with other youths organized into warring age-graded groups. Our immediate universe felt restricted, but we could

travel through other neighborhoods without the badge of color immediately drawing attention from other adolescents. Our collective self-worth was not defined by our turf, nor was any individual's identity wrapped up with a street reputation for toughness. Our masculinities were created in a variety of ways, and street brawling did not have to be one of them, although I believe we would have defended ourselves if attacked. On that afternoon, we backed down for a hundred reasons, including fear, but most important, we did so because our manhood was not at stake in the defense of a city block.

Many of the individuals encountered in this book did not have the luxury of retreat. Gang members fought and treated each other brutally for a number of reasons—to defend ethnic pride, to protect turf, to avenge the honor of a girlfriend, to enjoy the spectacle of another's suffering, or to break up the monotony of daily life. The most significant reason was that masculine identities were created through confronting and besting enemies, by testing and probing for weaknesses even among friends, and in posturing and negotiating on the street before the critical eyes of one's peers. Image, honor, and masculinity were all intertwined in a public presentation of self that required a public defense. A blow to any one of these elements threatened to unravel a precariously woven identity.

The stakes wagered in public confrontation were so high because, in many sections of New York, other supports for masculinity were so few. The hustler, pimp, gambler, numbers runner, and petty criminal—the streets themselves—were unambiguously male and defied the female dominions of home, church, and school, as well as the class subordination demanded by the workplace. Rebellious adolescents saw family and work as hopeless encumbrances, while “street culture,” the art of getting by and putting on, promised freedom and encouraged adolescents in poor neighborhoods to apprentice themselves to the most dominant males in sight.

At the same time, the legitimate alterego of street culture—a male “shop floor culture”—was less attainable in postwar New York. Shop floor culture combined resistance to work discipline with a celebration of male sexual privilege, drinking, and fighting. Shop floor culture facilitated adolescent males' transition from school and family to the workplace by incorporating, and to some degree, taming elements of street culture. But shop floor culture rested on the availability of physical labor in indus-

try, on the docks, or in the construction trades. In the 1950s, these jobs, although declining, were still relatively plentiful; they were not, however, always available to African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Street culture, constructed around public assertions of dominance and confrontation, was the most accessible way for those adolescents excluded from masculinized labor to form masculine identities for themselves.

While both my group and our Puerto Rican opponents shared in street culture to some degree, there was not much ecological support for it in my neighborhood. There were no knots of unemployed men standing on the corners, the local prostitute lived with her lesbian lover, we never saw a pimp on the street, and drug use and sales, if they occurred in the neighborhood, were not visible to us and thus remained absent from our consciousness. Alcohol abuse and wife-battering were known to all of us, and consumption of alcohol and dominance over women seemed to be part of the natural history of becoming a man, just like racism and anti-Semitism were an unquestioned part of our being “white” and Catholic in the 1960s.

We shared enough with our opponents to understand them, but we were not similar enough to be forced into confronting them physically. For us, class and “race” intersected to produce a measure of privilege just large enough to allow us to avoid a fight and still maintain our masculine identities. Our opponents were able to assert their dominance by simply walking down the street, so that they did not feel it necessary to push hostility into attack. Other boys on other occasions, galvanized by fear and pride, did not back down in their confrontations, and their battles sometimes left city streets littered with mangled bodies for police, reporters, and historians to discover and use to trace the meaning of their conflicts.

I started this book with a search for information about one of those conflicts. While completing work on a previous book, I read and saved an obituary about Salvador Agron, the Capeman, published in the *New York Times* in 1986. The *Times* reported that Agron had led the Vampires in an attack on a group of boys in a midtown Manhattan playground in 1959, killed two of them, and became the youngest defendant ever sentenced to death in New York State. Prominent liberals rallied to save him from the electric chair, and while in prison, Agron became literate, acquired his GED, took college courses, and wrote poetry and political

tracts. The case and his trial raised questions about Puerto Rican and African-American migration to New York, ethnic relations between the migrants and the dominant Euro-American communities, and the meaning of youth violence in postwar New York. I found the district attorney's files about the case, but Agron's confession and the first volume of trial minutes were missing, having been borrowed by an earlier researcher and never returned. As a result, my project on Agron evolved into one on street gangs in New York, and my focus shifted from the 1950s to the entire postwar period. I became interested in answering a series of questions: Why did the period from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s witness an explosion of gangs? How did gangs mediate between adolescence and adulthood? How did poor adolescents react to competition for space and resources? Why did some adolescents choose to shape their masculine identities through gang membership?

In order to present my argument about masculinity and the formation of gangs in postwar New York, I have used both a chronological and a thematic organization for this book. In the first chapter, I present the structural context needed to understand street gangs. I examine economic change, the effects of migration, and the impact of urban renewal and slum clearance in pitting African-American, Puerto Rican, and Euro-American youth against each other. Chapter 2 is chronological and analyzes the increase in gang violence after World War II as "racial" boundaries were transgressed. In chapter 3, the focus shifts to case studies of two neighborhoods, Washington Heights in the 1950s and East Harlem from the 1930s to the 1950s. I show that gangs were organized territorially and were able to integrate different ethnic identities into gang membership. The next four chapters are thematic in format. Chapter 4 makes an argument for the centrality of masculinity in understanding gangs, especially as rebellious youth rejected the authority of school, family, and workplace and established their own criteria for determining worth. Chapter 5 examines language, clothing, style, music, place—the elements of a "gang culture" that transcended ethnicity and united gang members even as they fought each other. In the sixth chapter, I look at the process of leaving gangs and at the different paths into adulthood available to gang members, while chapter 7 examines the impact of gang intervention programs. Chapter 8 is chronological and analyzes the decline of gangs in the mid-1960s, especially the role of heroin in the process, and the

reasons for gangs' reemergence less than a decade later. In my conclusion, I compare the gangs of the postwar period with those in modern New York and argue that gangs have shifted from social to economic organizations.

Throughout this work I have tried to balance agency and structure—to see gang members as actors and to understand the world as much as possible from their point of view, while recognizing that gangs existed within a larger context of power and inequality. These interests drove me to search through the archival collections of settlement houses, to study gang member autobiographies, to examine mayoral papers, to read volumes of newspapers, to interview former street club workers for the New York City Youth Board as well as former members of the gangs with whom they worked, and to walk around and observe many New York neighborhoods. Gradually I found myself drawn across 96th Street.