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Contents

Prologue

Howard S. Becker

Learning to Observe in Chicago 7

Introduction 10

Anthropology in the City

Peter Jackson

Urban Ethnography 17

Nele Brönnner

Norman's Bay 41

Les Back

Inscriptions of Love 44

Nele Brönnner

Ann Arbor 73

Ruth Behar

**My Mexican Friend Marta Who Lives Across
the Border from Me in Detroit** 76

Nele Brönnner

Berlin 85

Moritz Egg

**Carrot-Cut Jeans: An Ethnographic Account of Assertiveness,
Embarrassment and Ambiguity in the Figuration of Working-Class Male
Youth Identities in Berlin** 88

Nele Brönnner

London 111

5

Anthropology of the City

Rolf Lindner

The Imaginary of the City 114

Nele Brönnner

Millbrook 121

Jonathan Rahan

The City as Melodrama 124

Mirko Zardini

Toward a Sensorial Urbanism 141

Margarethe Kusenbach

The Go-Along Method 154

Nele Brönnner

Chicago's South Side 159

Loïc Wacquant

Urban Desolation and Symbolic Denigration in the Hyperghetto 162

Epilogue

Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren

Doing an Ethnography of 'Non-Events' 173

Out in the Field – Comics for an Urban Anthropology 183

Acknowledgements, References 185

Authors 186

6

Prologue

Howard S. Becker

Learning to Observe in Chicago

I am reading Jean Penneff's account of the observational experiences of his generation in a small town in Southwestern France after WWII. He describes how the kids could watch the tradesmen at work in the street, because most workshops were not big enough to hold all the things the artisans did; how these workers would have the kids help them ("Hold this, kid!") or send them on errands ("Go get me this or that tool" or "Go get me a beer from the tavern"). He talks about watching the dealings, honest and not so honest, of the farmers as they bought and sold cattle and horses, and of watching and seeing how some of them put the money from their sale in their wallet and went home while others went off to the tavern and drank it up. He talks about how the kids knew all about the adulterous affairs which were not so uncommon in the town. He says that experiences like these gave the kids the taste for observation and some real experience with, and skill in, observing. A good skill for a would-be sociologist.

When I was a kid in Chicago, I had some similar experiences. Of course, we didn't have a lot of people working at their trades in the street where they were easy for us kids to observe. But we had some other things.

The El. When I was perhaps ten, my boy friends and I would take advantage of the structure of the Chicago elevated train system (the El, everyone called it that) to pay one fare and ride all day long. Our mothers would pack us a sandwich and we would walk a few blocks to Lake Street, where the Lake Street El line ran from our neighborhood on the far West Side of the city to the Loop, the downtown center (so-called because it was ringed by the elevated lines, all of which converged from every part of the city on this center, went around it, and back to where they had come from). Once you got on a train, you could find places where the lines crossed – especially in the Loop – and change to another train that went to another

7



Loïc Wacquant

Urban Desolation and Symbolic Denigration in the Hyperghetto

Curtis and I set the electronic alarm on and promptly exit through the gym's front door, scurrying straight into his Jeep Comanche lest the bitter cold air seize and smother us. In the yellowish glare of the wintry street lights, I watch coach DeeDee calmly go through his nightly routine: with surgeon-like gestures at once precise and economical, he draws the rusty metal grate shut, tugs the heavy chain through its twisted and tangled bars, and closes the padlock with a deft snap of the wrist. (When I ask him to let me handle the gym's gate to relieve the strain on his arthritic hands, his typical reply is: "No, I know how to do it faster 'n anybody. I know this fence: I locked it a million times").

Old Floyd has offered to take DeeDee home tonight, as he does every now and again when he gets overly anxious to press the venerable coach about the (ever-so remote) possibility of him "turning pro" at some point down the road. DeeDee haltingly folds his largish bulk of a body into the small brown Toyota, his grocery paper bag between his long legs, knees up nearly rubbing against his stout chin. He waves at me gently and I read on his grinning lips, "See you tomorrow brother Louie."

Curtis insists on taking me to his neighborhood church for a visit with his pastor. As we bunker down inside his four-wheeler, he flips on a tape by the rap band, No More Colors, full tilt and the heavily distorted sound floods the cabin with its frenetic, pulsating rhythm. "It's my fav'rite song, 'cause it's positive: it tell d'kids enough killin's an' dope and shootin' an' stuff, don't do dat 'cause 'We're All Blacks, We're All in the Same Gang!'" – the song's inspiring if raucous chorus. He premeditatedly thumps on the dashboard to try and get the speaker on the driver's side to function and settles straight up into his leather seat. And then the morbid spectacle of the corridor of dereliction that is 63rd Street flashes by us as we rush towards Stony Island Avenue under the rusty elevated train line.

Curtis: At one time this neighbo'hood, you could get *anythin'* up and down this neighbo'hood – I mean, this was like d'downtown for the Southeast side. I mean, (enthusiastic) you talkin' 'bout Buster Browns, uh McDonald's, Burger King, uh, Kenny Shoes, P's, I mean, I mean: *you name it*, you can get it up-n-down here. Jus',

I mean dis use to be a *hot spot* right back, back in the sixties, da late or early sixties. Yeah, dis used to be the spot right here.

Louie: What is it like today?

Today it's *down*. I mean, lotta thin's is changed. You can see fo' yo'self that everythin' is, (shaking his head) *half offa d'buildin's aroun' here is boarded up*.

What kindsa things go on in the street right here on 63rd Street?

Well, you have a lotta street walkers, you have yo' gang-bangers, you have yo' *dope dealers*, yo' *dope users* – I mean (a tad defensive) that's in every neighbo'hood, I'm not jus' sayin' this neighbo'hood. I mean you have dat around here.

And it's *bad for the kids* that's comin' up in the neighbo'hood 'cause that's who they have to look up. They got people like *dese guys* (gesturing towards a cluster of men "shooting the breeze" by the entrance of a liquor store) tha's doin' *everythin'* wrong to look up to. I mean! Is that anythin' to try t' teach a kid, to be a dope dealer or a dope user, or to be a pimp?

You see like guys like this *hangin' out* up on d'street, *jus' bein' aroun'*, *jus' hangin'* around bummin' for quarters 'n dimes and stuff t' buy 'em wine. (Censoriously) It's *bad* ya know, that dese guys, they messed up they lives and stuff, ya know, or they don't *care* too much about you know, how dey life gonna turn out to be. Ya know, half-a 'em is in they late forties, late thirties and jus' don't care anymore, but it's *bad* dat we got dese guys out here like this jus' for d'kids to look up to.

People that don't know nuttin' about the Southeast side, comin' 'roun' here and see this, and the first thin' they think about (mockingly, in an exaggeratedly scared voice) "aw! I'm not getting' out ma car! I'm not gon' leave ma car. I don't want ma kids to be 'round here or anythin'" ya know. *But*, it's somethin' for 'em to do. (He honks a blue Cadillac snailing along in front of us). You see everythin' is boarded up. They tryin' to put a washer and dryer over here (he points to an abandoned building), a laundromat over here. Now thata be good for the neighbo'hood, for the community.

And look over here on the left...

It's a store that sell liquor, with another store that's boarded up that useta sell liquor an', you see people walkin' up an' down d'street with jus', they on a wish an' a prayer...

Ya know, *you can never say what's on dese guys min'*, what's on d'peoples min' out dere, ya know: *they out here ta live, they live day-by-day*. And you know (raucous) *it's baaaad*, jus' –