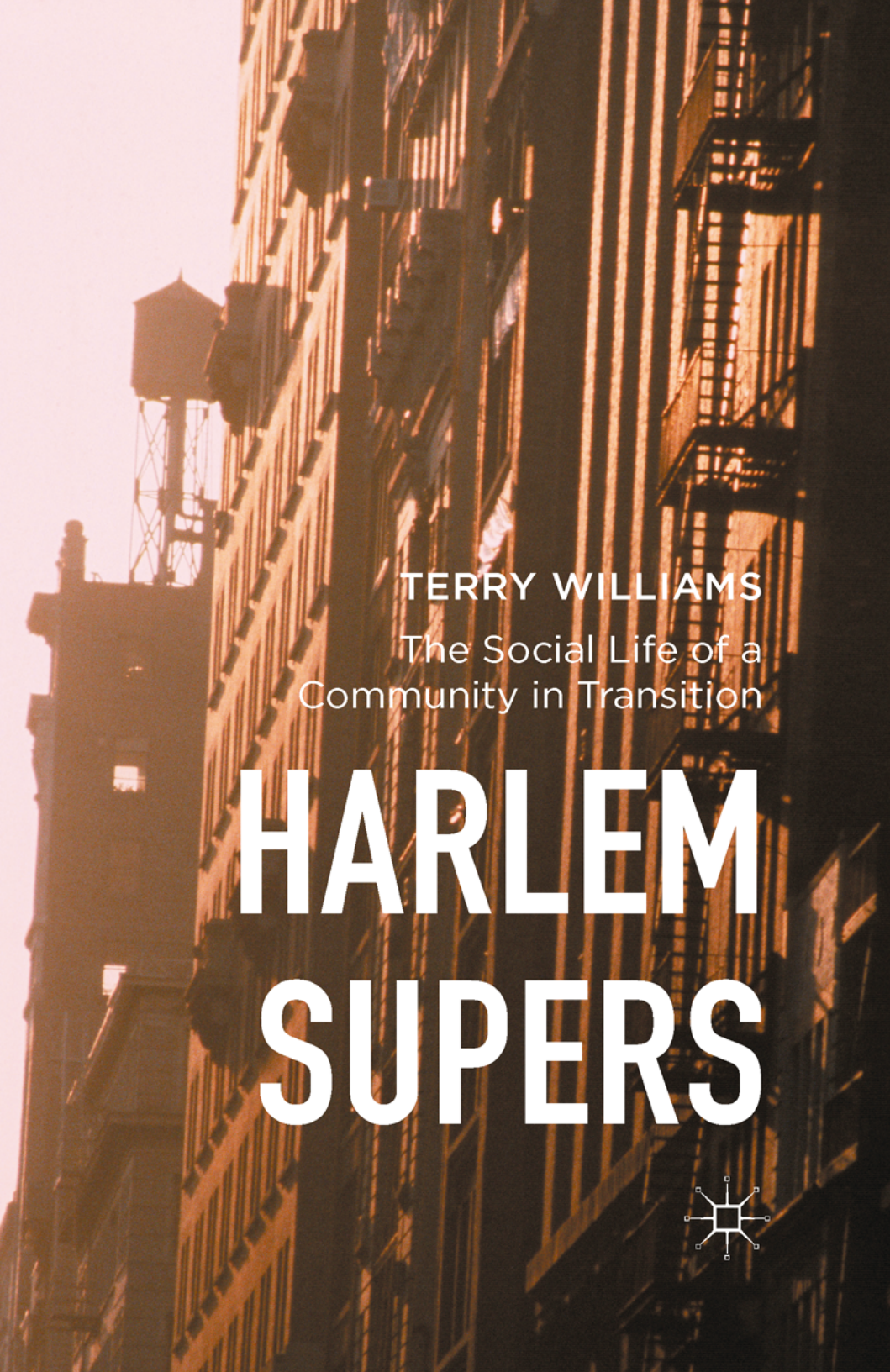
TERRY WILLIAMS
The Social Life of a Community in Transition
HARLEM SUPERS

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For Barbara Epstein, whose kind heart
and warm guidance lifted spirits

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something.
—CliffordG eertz

My first sight of New York City was in December 1964 after arriving from Mississippi for an eight-day sojourn to perform at Harlem's Little Theater with several high school classmates. It was a few months earlier in the summer that Harlem riots swept through those same streets, boiling with anger at the death of a Black boy named James Powell, killed by an Irish policeman. I only stayed eight days, but during that time I lived with an integrated couple in Franklin Plaza, a middle income housing development in East Harlem. At the time, I knew no distinction between east or west, south or otherwise; it was just an exciting new adventure to be in a city. After returning to Mississippi to finish high school, I immediately came back to Harlem the following summer and spent my teenage years in the Manhattanville area near City College.

I lived in Harlem several years, attending college and traveling by boat to Staten Island, and after graduate school, I moved to Washington Heights for a few years but kept my apartment in Harlem. When John Jackson wrote his book *Harlemworld* (2003) a decade ago,[1] one of his major laments was that he had no "spot" in which to hang his hat or to anchor himself when he did his study of the Harlem community. Such locations or "spots" are what sociologists and anthropologist refer to as field stations, and over the years, I have been involved with more than one. The field station is where you first heard it or saw it with your own eyes. You were either an eye- or earwitness to the events as they unfolded, as this is the essence of the field station: it puts you upfront and personal in the middle of the research action, and it was the place every researcher worth her salt wanted to be. I happen to have ethnographer's luck, and that luck simply meant that all I had to do was look around and I had my

field station. It was my home in the middle of Harlem, where I had been meeting and greeting people for years. I had witnessed changes over thirty years of living in Harlem, raised my kids there, lived and loved there. It was a natural field station. It had become a field station strictly by default. I paid rent, gas, and electric light bills, I cooked, and I held get-togethers there for the kids and visitors who made it a place of peace for them as well. This was certainly a field station—a homemade field station. I began my study, as I have with all my studies there, at that big glass table with those old chairs, surrounded by rooms filled with books. A table large enough to hold eight or nine people, it was my home as well as my home base.

It was at this home as field station that I met with scholars, journalists, filmmakers, writers, kids, people from the neighborhood, and activists coming and going from around the world, hanging out, visiting for a day, or spending the night—photographers and ethnographers from Japan, students and researchers visiting from various universities, people from far and wide coming to visit and conduct research, carry out interviews, eat food and drink wine, all of whom shared their stories and inquiries. It was at this location that the Harlem Writers Crew was born with Bill Kornblum and neighborhood kids hanging out, talking and discussing rap with rappers like the Jungle Brothers and Q-Tip and a Tribe Called Quest. They all would pick out from my oldie-but-goodie record collection and sample tunes for their music. This was the spot where graffiti artists like Serge and Isaac plotted their next artistic pieces before heading for the trains seeking fame.

Graham Court, where I lived, was also the home of poet and bestselling writer Quincy Troupe and impresario Margaret Porter Troupe, whose parties and soirees would bring the elites of the art, music, and intellectual world to their doors. The likes of novelist James Baldwin, Ismael Reed, Chester Himes, master poet Sterling Brown, musician Hugh Masekela, poetess Verta Mae Grosvenor, Jaynes Cortez, former first lady Jackie Kennedy, and novelist Louise Meriwhether would rub elbows with other writers, painters, musicians, and artists from around the world. Black people living in Harlem have their formal and informal intellectual watering holes and gathering places, and Graham Court serves, in many ways, as repository for a larger history about Harlem and the Black diaspora. The main story, too, is about how that real estate is an "architectural or residential hand-me-down," since Graham Court was never built with Black folks in mind as residents but for wealthy New Yorkers who could afford high-price luxury living. Furthermore, the sister building located downtown, the Apthorp, built by the same architects, Clinton and Russell, was maintained with greater care than uptown Graham Court—which raises all sorts of questions about preservation issues related to race and neighborhood and the fact that poor communities undergo much more drastic transformation

than wealthy white communities do in the city. But Graham Court is the home base and field station where my fieldwork is anchored and where this study began, which the following pages relate.

When I first came to New York City in the 1960s, the population in Harlem at that time was close to half a million people; today, it is less than half that. A decade or so later, the city of New York owned 60 percent of the buildings in Harlem and held 5,145 buildings in total. By 1984, the city owned only 1,803 buildings.[2] But Harlem was losing population as people went south to the Carolinas and Georgia and others crossed the bridges to Brooklyn, Jersey, and the Bronx. That is why Harlem is now 22 percent white (and growing) and 30 percent Hispanic/Latino. According to a real estate broker I spoke with who says she got her numbers from reliable sources, "The various neighborhoods that make up the village of Harlem have property values that has risen 222 percent, and in East Harlem, median market rents went from about $1,200 in 2002 to $1,900 in 2011. And do you know who my biggest customers are, buying up property? Young white women."

Harlem remains a mythological place, and numbers were never all it was about, because even before, when the numbers were higher for African Americans, Harlem was a unique kind of place. It was once an entertainment district for white folk, for instance, and Black folk, even though they were the majority, were barred because of racial segregation from going to their own night clubs, hotels, and restaurants. The Theresa Hotel, for example, located right on 125th and Seventh Avenue, banned Black folk. The same went for all the major night clubs, the Cotton Club, Alhambra, the big restaurants like Franks, and movie theaters like Loews on 125th Street—all these places kept Blacks out or in special sections. This was Jim Crow, northern style. One burning question is, what is the role of realtors in the development of Harlem? What accounts for the proliferation of condos sprouting everywhere? Some of the answers stem from the election of the first Black mayor of the city: David Dinkins.

This is really about native ethnography as much as it is about native anthropology, since Harlem is a complex, major community in the United States and the world and has been both my home and my ethnographic laboratory for a long time. In other words, it is where the ethnographer functions as both "native and ethnographer"—which means the community is being studied from the inside out rather than the outside in. Craig, whom you will meet presently, is an example of that link and one instance of "ethnographic overlap technique," which is the ability to sustain ongoing relationships with informants/contacts over time to gain their perspective on matters of import related to the neighborhood. The issue of the "authorial voice" has been the focus of debates within cultural anthropology and ethnography. As scholar Hakim Hasan said of himself as a subject in sociologist Mitch Duneier's *Sidewalk*: "My own 'theory'

about this from the perspective of a 'subject' in an ethnography is as follows: the natives in this singular sense do not have access to the 'cultural apparatus,' i.e., universities, publishing houses, Op-Ed pages, newspapers, magazines, editors—in short, those structural entities that produce, reproduce, and decide 'who' has credence in the world of interpretation. In short, as one scholar has framed it, it is 'interpretation without representation.'"[3]

The ethnographer is a link to the cultural apparatus and, to a large degree, a "story-fulcrum" through which the perspectives of the natives are told. In a certain sense, ethnography can also be regarded as means through which the tragic is avoided: a race against time to find those voices that link to larger structural and societal issues. Back in the 1980s, I was asked by a colleague if I knew anything about property in Harlem, since I'd lived there for a number of years. This innocent question would play a part in an experiment where I would end up in a landowning consortium with several investors buying several buildings over a ten-year period. Included in this book are extended notes from my journal explaining how it all started.

This book is grounded in understanding and explaining what is arguably the most important question for all New Yorkers: What is a city? How are communities built and maintained, whether in the face of increasing crime, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, or of the rapid gentrification most neighborhoods are currently undergoing? How and why do communities erode and become revitalized? And to whose benefit? To explore those questions, I look at an overlooked, yet essential character in the life of the city: the super. Taken for granted, and even more invisible than doormen, supers nonetheless play a central role in the daily life of New Yorkers, and they do so not just in the buildings that they work in but in the neighborhoods they inhabit. As I witness supers and their diverse social lives, in buildings in these various communities, I am reminded how each of these neighborhoods and situations is defined by the people in them. As an ethnographer, I'm interested not only in a descriptive account but also in the processes that come together to form urban social worlds.

How do these worlds come together, how do people live together in them, and how do they stay together under various conditions? I go to places in order to gain first-hand knowledge. Learning for me is about doing, and by doing, a new way of seeing emerges, because I am able to get at a level of understanding not available to me otherwise. I am interested in "acts of becoming": in this case, the way porters and handymen become supers, a kind of worker metamorphosis, the chrysalis beginning with the person without skills who then acquires them to proceed to porterhood then superintendent. The interest is clearly in the "how" rather than the "why"—a clear interest in the fixers, not so much the makers, as sociologist Douglas Harper contends in his book *Working Knowledge*, where he makes the distinction between those who make objects

and those who fix them. We will deal more with this notion later in discussing practical knowledge.[4]

In *Doormen: Fieldwork Encounters and Discoveries*, sociologist Peter Bearman provides an interesting insight into the tenant–doorman dynamic, but supers are given short shrift, in part because that was not his main focus.[5] Bearman limits his attention to wealthy buildings in affluent neighborhoods. His book is one of many occupational studies done by scholars over the years that examine social interactions between the "haves," the "have-nots," and the "somewhats." Bearman is not too interested in the social aspects of the doormen's lives and really spends little time with the "human behind the door" whose duty is to serve others. Yet it is true that Bearman's book is important public sociology, and we as scholars are more the wiser for his astute analysis.

Supers, doormen, delivery boys and girls, and maintenance staff are all in a special position to tell us something about the folk who make up the building, the tenants, who in turn tell us something about the neighborhoods—about class, race, gentrification, and other matters of import. The doorman is, however, in a privileged position; not all buildings have them, so their presence in the changing neighborhood signifies something: a new class has arrived, new money or old; a different group of people have entered the neighborhood. While the doormen guards the entrance way as the first line of defense to protect the tenant, the dividing line between public view and intimate privacy, the super is inside all the time and knows and sees tenants at their most vulnerable and needy.

Beyond the interest I have in this research, and the interest I believe the public would have in reading a book about New York supers, there is clearly a gap in the literature concerning the life of manual laborers in New York City and the role they play in the life of the communities and neighborhoods that form the city. In a context of accelerating gentrification and displacement (in particular in Central, South, and West Lower Harlem), this book contributes to understanding the processes undergone by the community when facing great changes, and I argue that supers play an important role in the vitality of the community. In New York City, every building with more than nine residential units has a superintendent; called "supers" by New Yorkers, these individuals are part of the invisible bone structure that holds the city together and forms its spirit and soul. Tenants rely on them for many small and large duties, and beyond fixing and cleaning, the supers are also expected to "be there" at any time and therefore provide a sense of safety to the tenants as well as a human feeling to an otherwise empty building.

Supers, unlike doormen, live on the premises, and since there is someone in charge, the building domesticates the common inside areas and the immediate front of the building and therefore provides a sense of security and humanity.

Hence, in short, being a super is a "total profession," a socializer as well as an attendant to any and all tenant emergencies, which means a reassuring presence within the building, often doubled by a material domestication of space expressed through a welcoming lobby, an uncluttered basement, a clean walkway, and sometimes even the planting of flowers in the backyard or around the stoop. The supers, therefore, constitute an essential component of almost every New Yorker's life, and they are part of the quintessential identity of New York City. And yet, they remain often invisible and rarely discussed. It is an understatement to say superintendents are the key players in almost every building in the city, but no books to date have focused on their lives.

I attempt to provide an accurate portrayal of the "real world" of the superintendent in a changing community and, by extension, to identify those behaviors, beliefs, and circumstances shared by those who have taken on a profession most New Yorkers recognize but know little about. The super's job is in many ways taken for granted, and only when something goes wrong do we actually see the super in our buildings. The approach in this work began with the idea of doing a day-by-day account of the life of a person (Craig) I met years ago, and in fact, it had been part of another study funded by the US Department of Labor to document the life experiences of teenagers in their own communities that my colleague Bill Kornblum and I did in the 1980s.

In conversation, I learned about a porter's job Craig had in a gentrifying building not far from where I lived. He lamented how he had to work several jobs to make ends meet, since superintendent jobs were disappearing as a result of the new arriving migrating whites and returning Black elites who were moving back to Harlem and the city proper, buying up brownstones and condominiums in the area. This fact intrigued me, and I sought to find other supers to compare their stories.

This was the idea for the book: a story about one person who worked at a low-wage job in a part of the city rapidly changing. I learned how an isolated, casual conversation, seemingly insignificant, could offer the first tangible warnings of larger problems. While this is no Arab Spring, it does point to survival issues of an entire community. I begin with the daily life of one porter and then two supers and one super/owner until I reach out to ten workers in the profession, nine of whom are interviewed in depth. Participant observation and interviewing provides details and the core variety of ways I gathered information, but I also utilized other approaches to data collection, including mapping, photography, and videography. The portrayals unfold from the daily work schedule of my key informant, a day at work in one specific neighborhood, and then move on to the other supers in several different neighborhoods. I mapped out these various neighborhoods because I have lived or done research in all of them and in addition bought and sold properties in these same areas as well. I

believe ethnographers, if they are doing the work as it should be done, are never just observers but also an integral part of the field study; they are, or should be, one of the frames for the story.

My neighborhood credits include once having lived in a Manhattanville housing project on 126th Street and Old Broadway; in a two-bedroom apartment on 123rd between Lenox and Seventh Avenue (Central Harlem); at 45 Tiemann Place, a stone's throw from the Juilliard School of Music and Columbia University in Morningside Heights; at 153rd Street, across from the famous Trinity Church cemetery between Broadway and Riverside in Washington Heights; at 155 street and Riverside Drive, where I moved to conduct research there for several years in West Harlem north; and finally at my current Central Harlem address at 116th Street and Adam Powell Boulevard. These various addresses provide a rich, exciting view of the neighborhoods included in this book and give a panoramic view of life in these communities.

This helps explain the community study aim, which is to document some of the interwoven trends that make up the life of a community before it is transformed, while it is being transformed, and after the transformation takes place. This is my aim, and while no overarching thesis is advanced, save for the notion that supers are the canary in the coal mine, many questions are raised that scaffold other theoretical concerns. For instance, I had questions about the neighborhood before I began my discussion about superintendents. What are the forces that cause a community to change? What happens when a neighborhood begins to change? What relationship does neighborhood gentrification have to the changes in status position of the super? How does a doorman become a super? What do supers do after their tenure as super is done? I cover four neighborhoods and ask these questions: Where do poor people go when they are displaced? How can we account for their displacement? About 46 percent of New Yorkers are "near poor," which is another way of saying that a family of four earns less than $46,000 a year and is "severely rent burdened" (paying more than half their income on rent). In that regard, this discussion opens up questions that suggest a fresh point of departure in the study of community-related actions and behaviors.

After the introduction, I focus on doing ethnographic work in the city and highlighting the extent to which my prior experience as an apprentice to my father as a local tradesman in Mississippi and working as a super's helper here in New York aids in understanding the super's world view. I describe the narrative and the methodological practice of participant observation and the way the fieldwork was accomplished.

The Neighborhoods

The areas in the study presented here include a variety of intriguingly diverse communities that make up an alluring mosaic, and as the sociologist W. Lloyd Warner notes in his methodological section to Drake and Cayton's classic study *Black Metropolis*, "When a community is studied, not as an atomic sandpile of separate individuals, but as a set of interconnected human beings living in a vast web of vital relations, it is necessary to learn what the relations are which bind people together and maintain their interactions in cohesive union. This necessitates living with the people being studied, interviewing them, and observing what they do."[6]

The method of community study suggested in this passage is certainly similar to the one reported in this volume. This is largely a multipersonal document, set against the backdrop of the neighborhoods; a narrative emerges from this setting in which a group of workers, older residents, newly minted millionaires, business owners, street teenagers, and tenants living in (and evicted from) their buildings tell their stories. Out of this narrative, one acquires a real insight into the conditions under which individuals adapt, families change, and neighborhoods evolve.

In the course of this study, I spent time with the supers, with neighborhood kids, in the bars, on the street, in the buildings, and in supermarkets, candy stores, bodegas, drug dens, after-hours clubs, churches, schools, local organizations, and barbershops in all four communities. In a context of a quickening gentrification and displacement (in particular in Central, South, and West Lower Harlem), I attempt to make a contribution to understanding the processes undergone by the community when facing great changes, and I argue that supers play an important role in the vitality of the community. Though I have chosen specific areas for my inquiry—South, Central, and West Lower Harlem, between 96th Street and 125th Street, river to river—I also interviewed supers outside of these areas as well.

Central Harlem

This historical part of the city has experienced rapid gentrification, which started with 125th Street between Malcolm X Boulevard and Fifth Avenue. Renovated or underrenovated brownstones line the streets between Frederick Douglass and Lenox Avenues; luxury buildings are being built, despite the recent economic downturn in the economy. This is West and Central Harlem—between 110th and 125th Streets, with Morningside Park to the West and Mount Morris Park to the East. These microcosms form the basis for my study of superintendents in gentrifying neighborhoods and will provide both homogeneity and heterogeneity; while all three are transitioning neighborhoods, they also differ in terms

of identity, community, population, or in the pace and form of the gentrification process they face.

I will be able to offer a unified look at what it means to be a super in a changing New York City neighborhood, while taking into account both the individuality of the supers I have worked with in the field and the individuality of each of these neighborhoods. I present four typical scenes from many I could have chosen to introduce the communities and the supers whose stories are told in this book. The field notes from each neighborhood should be read as episodes and are part of the storytelling device about supers and others who traverse the super's life in the city. These entries have a beginning, middle, and end, and moreover, they are not just ruminating but an attempt to provide a panoramic view of the super's life world.

In each of these communities, I was concerned with work and the men and women who make up a cadre of a certain kind of work, and I present an ethnographic portrait of both a vocation and a social group central to communities in transition in one of the largest urban centers of the United States: namely, the superintendents who manage buildings in four upper Manhattan neighborhoods of New York City. Through the figure of the "super," I seek to reveal the ethos, inner logics, obligations, expectations, and tensions that form the social worlds of a building and a city. This may seem like a heavy analytical burden for one figure, one archetype, to bear, but my colleagues and I have rich ethnographic data, and long-term engagement with the communities of study enable me to follow these supers and allow their experiences and narratives to evoke the changing tides of gentrification and displacement affecting the neighborhoods of Harlem. Indeed, I focus on the super as an intermediary vocational figure in the city housing landscape, and I complement and expand on Peter Bearman's *Doormen* (2005), giving voice to the socioeconomically diverse pool of people who live the role of the super day in and day out.

This study is part of a lifelong curiosity as an astute ethnographer and student of the underappreciated and often overlooked members of New York City's vast population. The narrative is an attempt at telling stories of individual lives and evolving subjectivities. Furthermore, I reveal through auto-ethnographic reflection my own ethnographic choices and dilemmas, my personal engagement with the space and people of Harlem, and my stakes in explaining the processes of socioeconomic and cultural change under way in these communities. I sought to understand something about supers but found myself learning about life in the community, life in the city, and life itself. My intention is to try to comprehend how racial and ethnic segregation, in this case as an ecological certainty and as a cultural standard, influences the ability of people in these communities to find work and maintain that work in an environment that is constantly evolving.

Why were these particular neighborhoods chosen? West Harlem because it is where I live and is perhaps undergoing the most intense gentrification; South Harlem because it is the low end of Harlem and is perhaps the area where the most powerful developers have concentrated efforts and is at the edge of Columbia University range; Central Harlem because the waterfront on both ends is heavily invested in, with Columbia taking over on the far west side and large corporations like Costco and other megacompanies taking over on the East River corridor side; and the middle part of Harlem is essential because of its history as an entertainment zone. The corporate takeover of Harlem as an entertainment zone is evident from a stroll down 125th Street, considered the epicenter of the new Harlem. It could be said the current process of gentrification began in 1994, when the Clinton Administration gave $350 million in federal tax credits and grant money to establish an empowerment zone in Harlem. But the original concept was the brain child of Republican Jack Kemp of New York, who had the idea for a federally designated empowerment zone that would be composed of tax credits encouraging investments in low-income neighborhoods, garnering market forces to help eradicate poverty. This money set the stage for various capital investments in Harlem businesses but really made it more attractive for corporate entities, as large government grants and loans as well as additional tax credits were included to attract the likes of big companies like Disney, Starbucks, Old Navy, and Gap.

South Harlem

This area, bordered by 96th Street and 106th Street between the Hudson River and Central Park, has seen considerable gentrification in the past five years. The construction of two high-rise buildings was recently completed in between 99th and 100th Street on both sides of Broadway. The wealthy area between Riverside Drive and West End Avenue is becoming more affluent, with older residents selling their property at a very high price to new, younger residents, and with many rental buildings trying to turn co-op. In the past five years, many small businesses have closed down on Broadway.

One characteristic of this little area is its "block-to-block" fragmentation, with Broadway acting as a major divide; indeed, one need only walk two blocks to go from a luxury doorman building on West End Avenue to the Douglass projects on Amsterdam Avenue. To the traditional Jewish, Dominican, and intellectual middle-class population of this neighborhood has been added a very wealthy incoming population in past years. This choice of a customized "South Harlem" area is not coincidental; it is motivated by my interest in community displacement and the material and symbolic transformation of the uptown part of Manhattan.

East Harlem

East Harlem, or the area also known as "Spanish Harlem" or El Barrio, above 96th Street on the East side of Manhattan, has also greatly changed in the past five or more years. Especially on its southern side, it is being gentrified rapidly, new buildings being constructed in long-vacant lots (for instance, next to the Mosque, on 96th Street between Third and Second Avenues) and old buildings being renovated. Spanish Harlem is now the "new rush" on the real estate market, especially for rentals. As a rule, there is a double process of gentrification in Spanish Harlem: the northward extension of the Upper East Side (which pushes toward the southern part of the neighborhood) and an amelioration of the neighborhood from within, which touches the entire area.

At the far end of 116th Street near the Harlem River, a huge hole in the ground beckons construction of what is said to be a megastore complex at the end of the major entranceway at the 116th Street exit, including a Costco megastore. Across the street from this possible site is the former Benjamin Franklin High School, now called the High School of Math and Science. I understand it will not be torn down, but the local pizza joint on the corner of Pleasant Avenue has been replaced. The avenue still has Rao's, two blocks away on 114th, the infamous mob restaurant where as recently as two years ago a man was killed because, as rumor has it, he insulted a "good fellows" girl. I should mention, by the way, that a friend got two colleagues and me a lucky dinner reservation there. He said it took a year to get the reservation. This is part of the changes taking place on a massive scale at both the East End exit (116th St) on the Harlem River and the West Side entranceway (125th St) on the Hudson River.

West Harlem

The area of West Harlem on the other major entranceway at 125th Street and 12th Avenue near the Hudson River is being transformed in another way by Columbia University, as they have purchased most of the property from 125th Street to 133rd Street along Broadway to 12th Avenue/Riverside Drive area. Columbia owns or controls 61 of 67 buildings at the site. This is a 17-acre locality in Manhattanville, and all but Fairway Super Market will be spared, though there are holdouts who say the power of eminent domain is being abused. I talked with the owners of the gas stations (BP and another one at the end of 125th Street and 12th Avenue) in the catchment area where Columbia intends to build. I spoke to Mr. Singh and a man who was Sikh and wore a colorful turban, who said they will not sell out to Columbia. If they close those stations, it would mean fewer gas stations in Harlem and in the city. They are all drying up

faster than you can say Jackie Robinson. The only holdout now is the Tuck-A-Way owner, Nicholas Sprayregen, on Broadway.

A park here is now open. Days at the Hudson begin at the place where I shop for fresh food and vegetables. For others, the location is for fishing, because any number of different fish can be caught in the river; the variety includes fluke, porgy, sea bass, blue fish, Spanish Mackerel, American eel, pollock, cod, blackfish, weakfish, and striped bass. I noticed an interesting sight the other day when the sun was not too hot and few people were fishing; two women had joined a third swimming in the river across from the habitat of a homeless man living in a big aquamarine-colored tent. His abode is right off the Westside highway near the stop sign before entering the Fairway parking lot. The women were having a good time as if the waters weren't polluted with PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). The catch fishermen bring home to their children and families to eat must be contaminated as well. But are the fish really contaminated? How does it affect the people who eat it? But then again, isn't all our food contaminated? How do we know the fish we eat at the local restaurant weren't caught in the Hudson? We don't really, nor do we know of all the contaminants in the food supply.

I'm sitting near the proposed pier watching two men attempt to fish, both adjusting the lines on multicolored fishing rods. I can smell the wafting pungent odor of marijuana in the air. The 125th Street boardwalk-type plaza has been under construction for some time now.

When I ask one fisherman what he thinks about the fish, he says, "Well, its food. I eat it. I'm not worrying about it being contaminated. The fish is good." I read the posted information regarding angling in the Hudson: "Notice to all marine recreational anglers. As of April 21, 2000 it is illegal to possess less than the minimum total length size limit as per New York State D.E.C. Total length: The longest straight line measurement from the most anterior or forward part of the fish with the jaws closed to the top of the tail."

There are nine fish with no seasonal limits: "weakfish [6 per day limit 16']; blackfish [14 l size limit 1 per day 6/13–10/6]; porgy [10 per day in season 10/17–5/31; sea bass [none]; blue fish [10 per day season none no limit]; pollock [size limit 19" no quantity]; cod fish [size 19" no bag limit season none]; Spanish Mackerel [size 14" 50 bag limit]; American eel [size 6" 50 bag limit]; striped bass [5/8–12/15 bag limit 1 per day minimum size limit 28"]; fluke [5/10–10/2 bag limit 8 per day]; flounder 3/18–6/30–9/15–11/30 bag limit 15 per day]."

I walk over to talk with two men fixing fishing rods and cleaning fish. I ask them about PCBs and the cleanliness of the river. They say the river has gotten much cleaner over the years. I ask if they will eat the fish they catch. One looks at the other, and they say almost in unison, "What do you think?" Then they

break out laughing. On further discussion, I learn they are unemployed garment district workers.

The older man with a red rod and reel says to me,

Older man: Did you hear the news about O.J.? (I assume he means O.J. Simpson.)
TW: No.
Older man: Well, he's getting married again.
TW: Oh yeah?
Older man: Yeah, he's taking another stab at it.

They both laugh hysterically and I finally catch what they mean and walk toward Fair Way Market. The older man and his scraggy-bearded partner have obviously used this gallows humor on other unsuspecting visitors. A White male passes on a bicycle, and the man who told the joke hollers out to him, "Why don't you go and die motherfucker. You already dead, you just won't go and lie down." The other one says, "I got the box." They both laugh louder than before and go back to fixing their poles and cleaning the fish.

The Supers

- *Athena*. A woman of strong will and courage who has penetrated the mostly all-male world of the superintendent profession. Unabashedly secure and levelheaded, she says confidently that her most valuable tool is her knowledge.
- *Craig*. A complex, intelligent man who works several jobs including super, sexton, and all-around handyman in buildings along the Seventh Avenue corridor. His work as sexton in a local church finds him dutifully carrying out his own special work ethic.
- *Tolton*. A 37-year-old Trinidadian who works in seven different buildings and considers himself, as do those around the block, a "neighborly man." A carpenter by trade, he is not married but has a daughter in college. One of the more astute of the superintendents, he is candid and perceptive about the neighborhood changes taking place in his particular zip code.
- *Allan*. A strong, serious super of a building that is immaculately kept and located in a dramatically transformed neighborhood that only a few years earlier was mostly abandoned properties. He has been on the job for more than five years and is one of the youngest supers in the study group.

- *Larry*. The elder statesman of the group of supers, whose wisdom and hard work over several decades makes him one of the enduring figures in the workingman's landscape that makes up the village work force in Harlem.
- *Sharif*. Known as the "Hollywood super," he is more like an executive than a super, dressed casually and without the "dirty overalls" look of most supers. He is married with kids and spends most of his time supervising others on his staff in a large building with both rent-controlled, rent-stabilized tenants and condominium owners.
- *Frank*. Considered one of the most candid of the men in the group of hardworking individuals. He lives in one of the most exciting new areas of Harlem, commonly referred to as "Little Mexico."
- *Kelly*. The only woman super who works as both a mother and a full-time operator of a building in a changing South Harlem neighborhood.
- *Flynn*. A man with a unique set of talents who has worked in construction and had his own business before becoming a super.

Harlem: A Brief History

Harlem was originally the home of Native Americans before it was seized by the Dutch as the land came under the control of wealthy Dutch farmers by 1658. Then the British took over around 1664. For the next two centuries, Harlem experienced ethnic shifts from Native American to Dutch to French to English populations, and the "village of Harlem" was basically like other small villages throughout New England: quaint, with fewer than a hundred families scattered here and there and with one church, a single library, and one school house until the middle of the 19th century.[7] Though the grid plan of 1811 included Harlem, development did not occur until 26 years later, when the New York and Harlem Railroad began operation in the area. According to historian Gilbert Osofsky, a slow transformation began to move Harlem from a rural backwater into a suburban community. The Black community at that time was sprinkled in pockets throughout the city, though most were living in "Little Africa" in and around Minetta Street and Minetta Lane in Greenwich Village; a small group of Black and Irish poor were also housed in shanties in Seneca Village, later to become Central Park. It is believed Black families from Seneca Village moved on up to Harlem, as did small groups from San Juan Hill near Lincoln Center and Hell's Kitchen Clinton area.

By the 1850s, Harlem was seen as a location where expansion was possible, since farm lands were overwrought, and the land itself became a valuable entity, especially since population was increasing in the city and speculation about rail

construction in 1881 and possible subway lines thereafter was at a fever pitch. But by 1873, Harlem was annexed to New York City, in part because of the northward movement of Manhattan's population expanding in that direction. The rapid elevated transit lines extended to Harlem by the 1880s, along with subway routes, and this made it possible for Harlem to be connected to lower Manhattan.

The Apartment Craze

This land speculation sent news to businesses such as the Equitable Life Insurance Company and rich investors such as the John Jacob Astor family and others that developing properties in Harlem might be worthwhile in the coming future as the population continued to climb. New York City's population was projected to reach a million people, and by 1880, it had. Apartments were then known as "French Flats," so called because the style of the layout of the space, a suite of rooms on one floor of a building, was the architecture popular in Paris. This style of living was imitated and brought to the attention of an American financier, Rutherford Stuyvesant, who built the first apartment house in New York City, which was designed by Richard Morris Hunt, who had studied at the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The Stuyvesant Apartments house, the first building in the city to house under "one roof more than one family of the sort that aspires to high social status," created a craze among builders, who saw the "apartment" as the most efficient way to make room for the burgeoning population in the city, since opportunities for owning a brownstone and/or living in a house (the preferred style and ideal of the rich and increasingly the middle-class aspirant) became more limited. In addition, with the apartment, many more people could be accommodated, as singles or families, and this became the way the city was to be in the future.[8] Historian Gunther Barth states,

> In the modern city the apartment constituted a basic unit of urban life that once again could expose the whole family to what Howells called the moral effect of housekeeping. Parents and children sat down for dinner at "their" table, instead of eating a la carte in a restaurant or table d'hote in a boarding house, like one of Henry James's Bostonians, who "got her supper at a boarding-table about two blocks off." The group around the table in the kitchen or dining room of the apartment was a single family unit, a fact reflected in the smallness of the rooms. It gave a feeling of home, in contrast to the boarding house, where one of Frank R. Stockton's heroines "never felt at home except when she was out."[9]

But the apartment house was also an economically viable institution, as Barth notes: "It was an intensive and functional way of living that permitted the concentration of people in most areas of the city, boosted land values almost

everywhere, stimulated building construction, and augmented the power of capital to provide services. It created new jobs and enabled people to benefit more directly from the jobs their great numbers called into being. Tenants' needs for services ranging from garbage collection to elevators created groups of employees attached to an apartment house, from managers to janitors."[10]

The Vertical Growth of the City

"The spread of apartment houses enhanced the job mobility city life offered by enabling people to find basic living conditions wherever new jobs appeared. Such a new flat, in another part of the city, was in many cases removed from the ground by several flights of stairs. The vertical expansion of attractive living units increased the area of urban space that could be structured by the individual."[11] I might add how the growth of vertical space also helped create the need for superintendents or housekeepers to look after the space instead of the tenant, as ground-floor living once required. At first, the upper and middle classes were not in favor of dwellings where people shared accommodations, because they viewed such behavior as "beneath them and lower class," reminding them of overcrowded tenement life that was devoid of adequate air, heat, and sanitation. However, several factors began to whittle at these preconceptions and made it more acceptable to the upper classes by the end of the century. One of those factors were economic realities, since people could not afford to buy homes, as they were in limited supply, and another reason centered around certain Tenement House Law reforms created in 1867 and 1879, such as the Dumbbell Plan, "so named because the indentations of the shafts created a building footprint that resembles the shape of dumbbell weight: these buildings are also referred to as 'old law' tenements. Unfortunately, the shafts required by the 1879 law were so small that they provided little light and air to apartments below the top floor, the windows of adjoining apartments were so close that privacy was impossible, and the shafts became receptacles for garbage and flues that sucked flames from one floor to another during a fire."[12]

By 1889, or some twenty years after the first apartment was constructed in the city, Harlem was graced with the first luxurious apartment house, as this was quickly becoming an urban city and Harlem was the place where wealthy landowners began building housing for the rich. This included William Waldorf Astor, who commissioned the building of a palatial house, the tallest in Harlem at the time, an "apartment house" at 116th Street and Seventh Avenue that had eight elevators in the 100 apartment building, two in each quadrant of the complex (one for tenants and one for servants in back), with other amenities such as fireplaces and mail chutes on every floor. The rents were $900 to $2,000 per year, which was no small change at the time, and only the rich and the upper-middle class could afford it. Residents included the British, German,

and Irish upper crust. The value of property in Harlem rose to unprecedented heights around the time. The era of the smaller luxury "French Flats" ended with the construction in the city of new courtyard apartment buildings such as those like Graham Court, the Apthorp, and other classically inspired structures. Meanwhile during this period (1870–1910), the vast majority of what might be described as the original housing stock of Harlem was constructed; row houses, tenements, and many luxury apartment houses fed the speculative wave as the transit lines, railroads, and more general urban urgency ushered in new institutions of a religious (churches), cultural (boys and girls clubs), and educational (literary societies) character, which became a necessity with the burgeoning population in the city proper. Harlem was a vibrant, exciting, diverse community at this time in New York City history, and various institutions sprang up there during this period, including social institutions such as German beer gardens, fraternal associations, and a philharmonic orchestra, as well as banks and other financial institutions. Another institution came into being during this time as well: the "Bubble"—in this case, the real estate bubble. Around 1904, one of the most consistent economic phenomena of capitalism occurred as a recession marked the beginning of a decline in housing prices. Expensive brownstones, graystones, and high-end, high-priced apartment houses were now in excess, and many of these building were taken over by banks as foreclosures. As in any bubble or oversaturated market, prices began to fall precipitously.

Blacks living in certain areas of the city where they were being ceremoniously harassed by new arriving immigrants began to see Harlem as a distinct possibility for a number of reasons: first, there were at the time, around the turn of the century, close to 70,000 Blacks living in the city, and a small group of whom were middle class and could afford the prices some Harlem landlords demanded. Others already lived in Harlem or nearby, in Seneca Village (later Central Park) and San Juan Hill near Lincoln Center. All these shifts and movements were actually early gentrification waves that began as early as the island was originally acquired. The dislodging of Native Americans, then the displacing of Irish poor and working-class Italians and Blacks—all these groups have been part of a historical eviction brigade that favors the rich over the poor and downtrodden. Blacks were moving up from Little Africa (Greenwich Village) to the Clinton Area and on to the Lincoln Center area because of hostility from Irish, Italians, and others who fought turf battles beginning with the Draft Riots of 1863 and continuing through the riots of 1900. Blacks were also beginning to move north from the Deep South in the Great Migration away from slavery-era agriculture, and Harlem was a major attraction, where good, solid housing was available, jobs could be had, and the living was easier in areas around 134th Street and Lenox Avenue.

Harlem Slums

The poor housing conditions Blacks found in Harlem by the turn of the century were inherited from White immigrant groups leaving Harlem in the years from 1910–20; the kinds of housing early immigrants a generation earlier would accept, their children now rejected and moved away from. Blacks became heirs to a ghetto, but to many from the South, this was better than shanty living on plantations and the other shoddy housing conditions Southern Blacks were accustomed to. By the 1920–1930s, Whites were rapidly moving out of Harlem, while new arriving Blacks from the South were moving in. Since Blacks who wanted to move to other sections of the city faced restrictive covenants, resistant White landlords, and out-and-out hostility from Whites who refused to allow Blacks to live anywhere else, Harlem became home by both design and default.

> The creation of a Negro community within one large and solid geographic area was unique in city history. New York has never been what realtors call an "open city"—a city in which Negroes lived wherever they chose—but the former Negro sections were traditionally only a few blocks in length, often spread across the island and generally interspersed with residences of white working class families. Harlem, however, was a Negro world unto itself. A scattered handful of "marooned white families . . . stubbornly remained" in the Negro section, a United States census-taker recorded, but the mid-belly of Harlem was predominantly Negro by 1920.[13]

The population of new arriving Blacks was mostly single and young, but most tenements (most were built before 1900) were largely places for big families with five rooms or more, and these came with higher rents as well. Blacks needed smaller apartments at lower rent rates, and as a result, many owners began "commercializing one's home," which is to say, renting out rooms to lodgers. These new apartments with many lodgers, some of ill repute, assisted in creating situations where vice and other forms of "lodger evil" became commonplace. With the community having inherited vice districts from immigrant populations, in conjunction with the numbers rackets, drug dens, and prostitution, sections of Harlem became more ghetto than ever.

Those sections of Harlem considered desirable Whites held on to as long as they could: sections along Riverside Drive, upper Seventh Avenue, Broadway, Amsterdam Avenue, and the Heights. Many more affluent Blacks began moving into these areas, and Whites resisted and wanted to restrict Blacks to one particular area of Harlem, and this resistance came in the form of the Hudson Realty Company, which sought to stem the tide of Black tenancy outside of a particular zone in Harlem. This realty company proposed buying all the properties

Blacks occupied and, once in control of these properties, evicting all Blacks from the area tenancy. Those African Americans with enough capital began a countermeasure and started purchasing apartment houses, brownstones, graystones, and any and all private residences they could find in Harlem.[14]

This shifting movement by Blacks from the more deplorable areas to better locations caused many Whites to panic and flee as Harlem became increasingly a Black enclave in certain parts. The Abyssinian Baptist Church, which was originally located in the Clinton area of Manhattan, moved to Harlem, as did other Black-owned businesses, cultural entities, and social and civic organizations. With the availability of grand housing, good solid homes, and upper-middle-class renting spaces, Blacks were not getting residential or architectural hand-me-downs as most immigrants previously had but mostly new buildings. Though they were not the intended target for such housing largesse, they became recipients by default. One thing is clear: Blacks began to demand and take over large swatches of Harlem as land and building owners, not just as tenants, and as the emerging phenomenon of the "apartment" took center stage as the type of living accommodations, New Yorkers were moving out of raggedy, dilapidated tenements. The end of tenement life and beginning of apartment house living was by the turn of the century a reality. The East Harlem side of the island was known as Muscoota or "flatlands" to Native Americans and Nieuw Haarlem to the Dutch, settled by Europeans as early as 1636. It is situated on the northeastern corner of Manhattan Island, along the East River. This area is bounded by Fifth Avenue to the west; 96th Street to the south; Randalls Island, Wards Island, and the East River to the east; and the Harlem River to the north.

Transportation was important to the growth of Harlem, and the newly opened New York and Harlem Railroad in 1837 provided a clear link to the city proper. Once the rail lines were in place, two other entities followed, the horsecar railroad and the steam railroad lines, as well as some time later, around 1880, an elevated line. These elevated lines made it possible for developers to see East Harlem's potential, and speculators began movement into the area because the lower east side tenements were becoming overcrowded, unsanitary, and uninhabitable for the vast majority of European immigrants, many of whom were in search of new places to live. No one wanted to live in a tenement if they could find better accommodations.

"In its popular sense tenement is used as meaning a house or dwelling, and more particularly in large cities tenement houses are buildings occupied by several families living independently of one another, but having a common right in the hall, staircases and outhouses."[15] The major problem with tenements at the time was poor sanitation, overcrowding, and abject poverty, and immigrants and new arrivals sought to find a place outside of New York's overpopulated Lower East Side ghettos and started moving to the Upper East Side. And while

the rail lines provided a link to the rest of Manhattan, they also ironically isolated East Harlem from the rest of Manhattan. Central Park, created in 1856, was a 14-block section of East Harlem, and it, too, was a barrier of sorts, since it blocked access from the western boundary as a result of all the buildings that extend along most of the boundary; these included hospitals (Mount Sinai, Flower Fifth Avenue), a medical school, a children's shelter, luxury apartments, and a middle income cooperative. The park's influence as a recreational resource has not been felt strongly by the residents of the area as a result of these institutions along the Fifth Avenue corridor.

But Harlem's heyday could very well be in the 1920s and 1930s, when popular nightclubs, bootleg liquor, marijuana tea pads, cocaine snorting after-hours clubs, including the original Cotton Club on Lenox Avenue, brought in celebrities and gangsters to see the mulatto dancers and jazz greats such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, and many others.

This was also the period when a serious and exciting cultural and literary forum emerged with writers like Langston Hughes, Nora Zeale Hurston, James Johnson, and artists too numerous to mention, and a haven of well-to-do middle-class African American families prospered as well. East of Fifth Avenue, East Harlem was a mostly Italian then Puerto Rican enclave during those 1920–30s years. East Harlem's development could be viewed in terms of four key eras: the first being the early population spurt from the time of the railroads in the 1890s to 1918, when European immigrants moved up from the lower East Side to East Harlem; second, when Blacks and Puerto Ricans began to replace the Italian population; third, when the influx of public housing projects started dominating the landscape in the 1940s and 1950s; and fourth, when the changes took place around 1960s activism with fights on several fronts, housing being one of them. Harlem celebrities were no longer musicians but political activists like Malcolm X, Yuri Kochiyama, and Bob De Leon in the battle against more public housing. The complex I stayed in when I first came to New York, Franklin Plaza, was the epicenter of the fight to not allow another public housing project to be built in East Harlem but have middle-income cooperatives instead.

The slow shift in East Harlem from a classic enclave to the social form we know of as the ghetto was the result of factors too numerous to account for adequately in this text, but several scholars have provided answers to how this came to be, including James W. Johnson's *Black Manhattan*, historian Gilbert Osofsky's *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, psychologist Kenneth B. Clark's *Dark Ghetto*, and historian Thomas Sugrue's *The Origin of the Urban Crisis*. These sources provide some answers to why Harlem became a zone in transition by the 1960s, as any number of factors played a role, including major banks and redlining, racism in hiring and educational apartheid, federal housing policies,

deindustrialization, residential segregation, loss of the Black middle class, neglect by the city in maintaining infrastructure, desertification by landowners and the neglect of property, social disorder, and other problems large and small. Harlem was a mess by the 1980s, when the recession of the period led to the downgrading of credit to the city and New York City itself faced a financial crisis, as did the rest of the US economy.

CHAPTER 2

Making a Living

Craig: Sexton and Superintendent

October 20, 5:10 AM. A cold morning. At this hour, the forenoon is not yet evident, since it is still twilight out and empty of people. The last time I was up this early was to go with a homeless man from the tunnel as he picked up discarded books from supers along Riverside Drive. This is a continuing account of a small subset of laborers (porters and handymen) who are in various stages of "becoming" supers. These journeymen all wish to become licensed as superintendents in the communities chosen as central to this investigation. The men and women these stories chronicle are the intermediaries between the tenants and the landlords, and I look at the role they play in the city, the block, the building, and the neighborhood, but more important, I look at the lives behind the numbers, since there are almost as many superintendents as there are buildings in the metropolis. Who are the human beings behind the dirty overalls, unkempt outfits, and greasy hands? What do they think and feel about family, the city, the neighborhood, the buildings they supervise, and the tenants they protect? This account is about the lives of superintendents, and it begins with Craig, a 29-year-old Black man, born in Harlem hospital, who attended high school in Kentucky, where he got a general education diploma and became a bricklayer. As a teenager, his parents did not want him hanging out in the streets and decided to get him into a trade far away from New York.

> They sent me to Kentucky to learn a trade and then I came back. It wasn't that they *thought* I would be dealing drugs; I *was* dealing drugs. I was a lookout at first, missing school, hanging out too much, and by the time they found out, I was already deep into the street. So they knew something was up and I was heading in the wrong direction. So they got me in this program that took kids from the city to the country to learn a trade. Well, you see, I had to do what they said because I was living with my parents, and if you living with your parents and if you respected your parents, you had to either do what they say or you out in the

> street. My mom used to say it's her way or the highway, so what you gonna do? I was sent to Kentucky because I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing, which was going to school. My mom would come home sometime and find me watching TV, and she said no, that's not gonna work. So she got me into Jobs Corp and I ended up in Frankfurt, Kentucky. When I got there, they asked me what I wanted to do, and I told them I wanted to do electrical work, but they put me into bricklaying. I didn't know nothing about bricklaying [laughs], but when I was done, I was the top student in bricklaying.

Craig eventually learned about electricity, and upon his return to New York, he applied for a super's license but didn't get it. He became a porter and sexton at a local church, where parishioners refer to him as "the sexton," a word he says means "one who is responsible for taking care of church property." "In the old days, it was the sexton who rung the church bells and dug graves." The duties he tells me are similar to those of a super, and he has aspirations to become a full-time licensed super one day, but for now, he is a porter at one building and a part-time super at two others. Apprenticeship is how he and most of the supers you will meet got their start: Tolton began learning as a carpenter through a neighbor; Sharif started out by hooking up with an ethnic network; Allan, Flynn, and Athena all got their early start from their fathers; Kelly, through sweat equity; Frank, by taking classes; and the others from either on-the-job training or sheer determination to learn a trade and make a decent wage. All of whom, you will hear more about presently.

I lean against the iron bannister at a building Craig once worked in as super and wonder why he's not here yet. He agreed a few weeks ago to meet so I could "shadow" him on his rounds today after much schedule wrangling. He promised to meet me at 5:00 AM; it is now half past, and he is nowhere in sight. The Yemeni stores on the southwest corner of 116th Street, one on both sides of the street, are not yet open, but I see one man unlocking the gate. They sell the usual fare: sodas, cigarettes, milk, water, cookies, candies, and lottery tickets. I heard the Yemeni store across the street is about to close, for reasons unknown, and recently lost a liquor license. There are usually three or four Yemeni men working in the store, but no women. Two men work behind the counter, one works in the back deli section making kosher sandwiches, and one younger male near the entrance door sits on a high stool checking aisles to see who might pilfer goods. Friendly, but detached, they speak Arabic one minute to each other and Black English slang to regular customers. Even the new hires, all Black males, speak Arabic. There are about 100,000 Africans in the city, many of whom live in this area now referred to as "Little Africa," which commands the 113th to 128th Streets Frederick Douglas Boulevard (Eighth Avenue) area. Up the street, African men sit playing with multicolored checkers with a

makeshift table board as others look on. This looks like American checkers, a game I have not seen played in a long time by old men outside barbershops, but it could be a lively African game, similar to checkers, called "draught." I notice the game is played with some enthusiasm, regardless of the name given to it, as players slam the board when they make a key play or jump multiple times against an opponent, one man speaking a native (tribal) language, mixed with an occasional French word or two (such as *merde*, "shit"), while the other player sweats nervously as he is about to be taken for two moves. There are no women around except one a few steps away with a makeshift table selling purple, green, white, and red sandals. She is dressed in a Muslim-type hijab and a purple cloth-like wrap around her shoulders and body, a kind of attire I see many of the African women wear.

This "Little Africa" has many languages that can be heard on the street; African teenagers from Mali, Senegal, and Gambia, those late arriving "Senegambians" ("big negro" as they were once called by Black Nationalists and poets), can be heard speaking native dialects interspersed with French and English Haitian patois, as women chatter and taxi drivers shout out cab windows in "Spanglish." I hear these accents and tonal nuances throughout the neighborhood as if it were another exotic language.

I keep thinking that perhaps I got the day wrong or the time mixed up, doubting, retracing my thoughts, wondering if perhaps his duties do not start at exactly five in the morning, until I see him walking up the street, dressed in blue denim, layered sweat shirts, black boots, and a cap, with gloves in a back pocket. He's not a big person, at 5'11" and 185 pounds, and he has a medium build and a slight mustache. Because of the physical labor, he is in better than average shape. His stride is purposeful as he waves and points to the door of the Yemeni store.

As I see Craig go into the corner store bodega, which used to have a rather rinky-dink sign outside, I notice it is now all new. This is a curious dynamic in the neighborhood as it relates to gentrification and street life—which, of course, carries with it emerging architectural or, more to the point, decorative signifiers that denote class and thereby exclusion. Things, therefore, are not the way they used to be in many ways, as newcomers arrive with their tastes. People do not come into neighborhoods and leave their tastes and what they need behind. They must be concentrically created within a neighborhood—that is, built out in relationship to newfound residences. So it is no longer, as previously noted, a question of just a bodega. It is now a question of a bodega and what I call the "gourmet name syndrome," because, as in the case of my neighborhood, it is basically part of the renaming of the neighborhood, where every bodega, mom-and-pop store, Yemeni-owned corner *groceria*, or Arabic kosher deli has the name "gourmet" attached to it ("gourmet deli," "gourmet

bistro," "gourmet cafe") and the interior has been renovated, the store front has been painted, new glass has replaced Plexiglas, and no partition separates the clerk from the customer. I doubt if any of the gourmet renamed shops actually know the true modern meaning of the word, which is a French term for one who takes a refined and critical or even merely theoretical pleasure in good cooking and the delights of the table. These newly renovated bodegas and corner stores have recessed lighting inside, which is decoratively far more inviting to the new arrivals, and carry expanded food options. The new arrivals, just by their very presence or anticipated presence, force these store owners to start carrying a broader range of natural and organic products, exotic beers, and additional foodstuffs. To some degree, one can say that these people brought "downtown" to the hood—whereas the folks in the proverbial hood (and there are middle-class people living here) did not have the wherewithal to force these sorts of changes. Now the question is, why?

The new gourmet signage is really a complicated situation that speaks to power, modernity, and, if you will, a modernization process within a community—a kind of will that is sorely lacking within communities of color. When economic forces reclaim the land that the ghetto rests on, the ghetto folk either have the means to stay by paying higher rents or have to move. This is updated cosmopolitan feudalism: a system where most citizens own nothing and are basically powerless to do much. The people in the ghetto are struggling, and it is the demographic equivalent of concentrated oppression—forces they cannot control. Yet they must find a way to cope or get out. This is an extension of the "gilded ghetto."

Within the context of this chapter and text, a much more complicated set of questions needs to be examined: to what extent have poor/middle-class Black/Latino communities been able to create their sense of the American pastoral, to borrow Philip Roth's phrase. If they do not have the economic power (drawn from elites who may not necessarily be looking out for "the people"), how do they impact and control the ebb and flow of what they believe to be their community—a vast wilderness, so to speak, of dwellings, many of them not privately owned and subject to the whims of faceless elites who see the fundamental units of a neighborhood (housing) as a commodity that is to be bought and sold no matter who is there. I reflect on these matters as I wait for Craig to cross the street.

A police car sits near the bus stop next to Philip Randolph Square, while a slow stream of cars trickle up and down the avenue, but at this early hour, there are few people. At the end of the block, near 115th Street, two African stores on opposite sides of the street, both with the name Diallo, are not yet open, and the streets are practically empty. A lone woman, who would have once been called a "shopping bag lady," ambles down the street pushing a shopping cart

and stops at the corner to rummage through the rubbish until a can or two is found. A teen rides by on a bicycle holding another smaller bike in the other hand. An early morning jogger trips by, and the dawn has yet to face the city. Craig emerges from the gourmet bodega holding bottled water and makes his way over to greet me. He repeats that we are going to the church today and says I can see how he makes his living. "I wanted to meet you today because around six [AM]. I head for the church because I'm the sexton in that place. And I gotta go uptown at the other building after I leave here."

If he wanted to meet me at six, why did he tell me five? I am a little pissed at this and am close to leaving, but at least I have used the time to take notes of the early morning doings. Hearing that he apparently has another job in the community is good news, though. He hints that that job is the same as the building job here on Seventh Avenue as porter, part-time super, and part-time janitor, all of which extend his duties and salary like that of a super.

I follow him to see what those duties entail. Craig's physicality is evident from his job-related activities: mopping, shoveling snow, garbage pick-up, the various acts of handling large and small objects (barrels filled to the brim, heavy bags, furniture, candles weighing 20 pounds each), and other assorted tasks in the church. He says the only association he has with religious duties is setting out the heavy candles in the church vestibule, covering the casket of the deceased, and assisting in raising the casket. The church is one of his three job sites. In discussions over the time we have come to know one another, it has become obvious that he's had one driving obsession, if I can phrase it as such, and that is to have a job. I think the one thing he always wanted is to have a job. As kids in the southland, we would say, "When I grow up, I want a car, or I want that bicycle or that house," but for Craig, it was to have a job. He talked about it as a kid and he didn't care if it was a good job or a bad job, a legal job or an illegal one; he just wanted to work, as work held inherent dignity. "I just wanna make a living."

This idea, this thing, this vocation, is a sense of being, a sense of purpose, a way to be somebody, a sense of being a man. "I wanted to work because my mother wanted me to work and since my dad was not there all the time, and with me working and bringing home the bacon, I could be the man. I could bring home some money so my mother would be proud of me." This statement was really underneath all this longing to work, and he would eventually recognize this understanding about himself. "But I knew they [his parents] wouldn't approve my dealing drugs and stuff, but for me it was just work and getting paid, however you did it. However you got it."

As we walk to the church a few blocks away, he talks about janitoring/portering/superintending with the ease of a man who knows his way around. He shows me a key ring with a bunch of keys attached, which he says are for various

jobs at different buildings. Entering through a downstair, as he unlocks the basement door, a musty smell of moldy furniture and old clothes greets us. Now, using one of the keys, he unlocks doors to closets holding brooms, mops, chemicals, and buckets; he removes the hand gloves and puts on rubber ones. "The biggest problem for me is cleaning the ladies room, because they piss all over the place." He's speaking about women parishioners, who, despite their God-worshiping adulation, still miss the sacred bowl. "They don't wanna sit on the seat, so they squat over it and squirt everywhere and they have lousy aims." Standing to the side, I smell Pine-Sol as it seeps down through the floorboards. I hadn't held that odor in my nose since I was a kid working with my uncle, who was janitor at the old Universal Elementary School in Mississippi. It was that Pine-Sol smell and gold-colored sawdust that rung in memory.

For Craig, none of that mattered. The piss-stained floors, the heavy lifting, the drudgery—it was what he wanted. It was making a living; this was the essence of what he wished to be. It was not the kind of job most young men his age wanted to do, and he knew he was different that way, different from friends he hung out with, because though the work would sustain him physically, providing him the food, clothing, and shelter he needed, the work was much more than that. The job would give him a sense of reality everyone around him would recognize. The work he had would make the neighborhood part of his soul tissue—a sinew, a thing that bound him to others and kept him connected to those around him. The job would tie him like an umbilical cord to the community. The work and the job held a moral side to it, too. Though he worked in the church, however, he didn't believe in matters theological. He was skeptical about the role of prayer as it relates to Blacks.

> But what does it [prayer] do except make the person doing the praying feel better about themselves? Otherwise it doesn't make any sense. Because when you think about it, there has never been any real, solid examples of prayer doing anything to change the way things are in the world. Am I right? You can pray until you're blue in the face and nothing will change a poor person's hunger into a plate of food on the table. Or get you a job, or a place to live in. Praying is just a form of superstition that people get into their heads. I think for Black people it's just a useless thing.

I asked if he was a Baptist or Methodist and whether working in a church made him want to join a religious group. "The church is divided, and if they can't make up their minds, I can't either," was one of his retorts. He told me he wasn't interested in what I might be interested in either. I asked him what he meant, and he said, "Well, you might be interested in how much money I make doing this [job] and what it means to keep busy and stuff like that." I was

a bit taken off guard by this statement and wondered where it came from, and I told him I did want to know these things but I wanted him to be comfortable with giving me the information. I wanted him to be OK with it. At this point in time, I was certain he did feel it was OK; after all, he'd given me permission to tag along. Did he suddenly have some kind of epiphany? Perhaps because we were in the church, he felt the need to be, well, religious, confessional. The work "thing" he said was a good thing, but he felt that "there were times when I felt it was a kinda curse, you know, it was a good punishment, on the one hand, and on the other, having a job keeps me out of trouble. Out of harm's way."

In our ongoing conversation, I mentioned to Craig how it could well be that the superintendent may have derived from the sexton. I told him about how I'd read that in the early church, the sexton was the same as the door-keeper (or the *ostiarius*), whose responsibility was opening and closing the church, guarding the vestry and other church properties, and keeping heathens and the excommunicated from entering the premises. The duties of the modern sexton are practically those of the ancient *sacritan*, meaning the keeper of sacred vessels and vestments (Latin *sacritanus* or *scrista*), a minor official of a parish who has custody of the church keys and is responsible for keeping the church clean and for the bell-ringing and lighting. Craig thought for a second, listening intently, holding the broom under his chin, then said the information was "cool" but it did not include his duties as sexton today, which include everything from garbage collector to boiler room control manager, floor sweeper, candle remover, and plumber. "They [church elders] be making me into an all-around handy man and plumber," was how he put it.

He showed me around the church, pointing out each job and the amount of time required to do it. He pulled the ring of keys out again and repeated what key fit which room. Keys are usually signs of special responsibility and status in any institutional setting, and for Craig, this responsibility is more important than for most, because he does not have a college degree and this job is what keeps him "out of trouble," which translates into "away from the streets." It's his primary support. This is what he does to make a living, and the keys are concrete proof of that fact. Craig knows that in an emergency, the people who are in higher status positions than he is will have to call on him to open the doors, either to the church or to their apartments. This gives him a sense of power he never had and now relishes. But it does not pay much money, which he says is important to him. "A person can like what they do, even love what they do, but you gotta be paid a decent wage to wanna love it and stay with it all your life."

As an employee of the church, the sexton does the same as mentioned in the text he read: taking care of church property and, at some churches, digging graves and ringing the big bell for church services. However, Craig does not ring

bells nor dig graves but said that back in the old days the sexton did that because it was one of the oldest churches in Harlem.

"This church was consecrated back in 1800 and it owned land in upstate New York that was bought by one of the rectors in the church." Craig mopped the floor as he talked, heading for the bathrooms and the vestry. "The floor is called a lyceum. Don't you find the language of the church interesting?" I nod and think to myself how the words *lyceum* and *sexton* give some symbolic meaning to the institution that says that it is different from other institutions in the community, and not just because it's the oldest.

He mentioned money, and though he never said how much he makes, I already had some idea about the yearly salaries of the super, and I knew it depended on a few things, including the size of the building the super works in, the location of the building, and the number of people or employees the super has to account for and supervise. Salaries usually range from $30,000 to $100,000, with most somewhere in the middle. But as we will see later, supers supplement their salaries doing "side hustling," which is essentially doing work outside of their regular job.

In 2006, when the study began, a four-year contract was signed by the Realty Advisory Board (RAB) and the supers union, 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union. The signed agreement did not include provisions about basic pay scales for supers, but it did specify a number of important points. One of the most significant was that in union buildings, a super hired cannot be paid less than the previous super was paid unless that original wage was for additional pay for previous years of service; also set in the contract was that building owners must provide a rent-free apartment (at least two bedrooms), free utilities, and free phone, and newer buildings must also provide free parking spaces, health club membership, and additional vacation time.

"Work is not just about getting paid," Craig told me, about to contradict his earlier statement. "It is about getting something to do. That's why so many people who hit the lottery still work. They stay on their job as long as they can. They stay until folk start to harass them, asking for loans and all that stuff. But if they could stay on the job without people knowing they won that money, they would probably do just that."

Craig felt he deserved to work and felt it was a duty to work, and not in the strictly Weberian way or Calvinistic sense in that it might have provided some kind of religious approbation to worldly goods and "good works" and such. I cannot say he believed wholeheartedly in this marriage between the American Dream and laissez-faire capitalism and Social Darwinism or what is more commonly referred to as the Protestant Ethic, but I can say he felt deep down in his gut that this work thing was somehow basic to his nature.

On another occasion, I met Craig in front of a building where he performs duties as a "jackleg super"—doing super-related tasks without a license—or as a porter. Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) requires live-in supers in residential buildings with more than nine units to be certified (he is not), and the certificate is granted only after completing a basic 15-hour skills training course that includes janitorial services such as operating a central heating facility, replacing a smoke pipe from a furnace to a chimney, and replacing washers and water faucets. Craig says he does regular super work at another building further uptown I have not visited. His duties at the building we now stand in front of include checking the boiler, sweeping the common areas, pulling garbage, deicing and salting the sidewalk before heavy snow, and checking for signs of mice or other vermin on the premises. He tells me he likes to see cats piss around the garbage because they "set their marks in the territory," as he puts it. These are the marginal spaces in and around the building he deals with: the basement, the rooftops, the unused rooms in the back, and the public fringe areas, where garbage is kept in the alleyways and rats can be seen scooting about. I notice as he speaks that his tone is sharply rapid with emphasis on his words, to the point where I miss some of what he says. His lips are thin and his mouth barely open, but his eyes widen when excited or when he's about to reveal something he feels is special. The last time I saw him, he couldn't recall the joke he said he had for me, but today he remembers. Imparting these jokes seems to gives him a sense of satisfaction. He relates a story a minister told him. He said they were standing in the kitchen area overlooking the "lyceum" (another church-related word that he uses as if part of his job). The lyceum is a large gymnasium-type commons where food is served for the congregation, used for community functions.

> The minister stops me one day in the hallway and tells me a story about a man who was very, very rich who lived on a hill. Though the man was very rich, he was also mean and stingy. One night he had a premonition that death was coming to him in seven days, so he decided to leave his home, pack some bags, and go into the village. He told his gardener he could stay in his house while he was gone and could have anything in the house he wanted, any of the fine meats, wine, fruits, eat anything in the house he wanted, and could live like a king. He could do whatever he wanted but had to promise him one thing, and that is, he had to be in bed before the stroke of midnight. And so the gardener did what he was told. He lived in the house, drank the finest wines, ate the best foods, and went to bed before midnight. He did this for seven days, and on the eighth day, his master returned, knowing for sure that the gardener would have been taken by death by this time. He entered his house and there sitting eating food and enjoying himself was the gardener. So the rich man asked if Mr. Death had come to see him and the gardener said no. So the rich man thought to himself, maybe death made a

> mistake and wasn't coming after all, so he left and went for a walk and as he got down to the bottom of the hill, he saw a man standing with a hood and scepter, and he asked the rich man who was the man who lived on the hill. The rich man answered that the man who lived on the hill was in the house sitting at the table eating. Mr. Death hesitated, and the rich man said, "Well, aren't you going up there to see him?" And Mr. Death says, "No, I'm a little tired today. I think I'll take you instead."

Craig looks at me for a response, then says, "So the moral of the story is that no matter how hard you try, you can't cheat death. When it's your time to go, it's your time to go."

The subject of death, the church, and religion is perhaps apropos, but it is an odd conversation, I think to myself. But on second thought, why not? Since Craig doesn't say much except the occasional street news or a joke he's heard, it is nice to see him animated.

Though this was once an all-White church—where the Black congregants had to cut the locks off the front door because the White pastor vowed to never allow Blacks to enter—today, ironically, the community church as a landmark structure is perhaps the only natural resistance to gentrification, with the possible exception of public parks. (The situation is changing; see Chapter 6.) Harlem has about 25 proposed landmarks to compliment the Jumel Terrace, Audubon Terrace, Hamilton Heights, and Saint Nicholas Historical Districts. Though Craig told me I could follow him to his part-time super job uptown after leaving the church, he got a call around seven and said I would have to take a rain check. "I work as a super in a couple of buildings uptown these days," he repeats. "And you can see how the community of Harlem is changing rapidly. In a few years we won't recognize this place. You already have a location that's only a short trip to the airports and everything so this place will not be the same in no time." He did say he could be available for the other appointment (video shoot) I have scheduled later in the week.

The Brand

These supers are in a community that encapsulates a personified brand, a tried-and-true brand that is much desired by those who wish to live in this village. Sociologist Sharon Zukin, a renowned scholar who has chronicled the role gentrification plays in neighborhood transformations, sees the changes happening in Harlem as part of a "brand" phenomenon.

As millions of tourists descend on the local neighborhoods, they invariably see the area as a "cultural" location, both historic and present day, that is free of crime and has a bevy of other amenities worth taking advantage of, including

new restaurants and bars, jazz clubs, a beer garden, African dance hot spots, a butcher shop, and a variety of other places both tourists and locals can frequent. Just a few years ago, for instance, all you could see along Eighth Avenue from 110th Street to 123rd were burned-out abandoned buildings. They were in that state, dilapidated, derelict, and deserted, for more than twenty years, but now there is an Internet café, a mosque, Melba's soul food restaurant, a newly renovated gas station, a wine shop, a French-style condo, a CVS pharmacy, a Citibank branch, and an HSBC office, among others.

The brand makes the neighborhood into a product, a consumer item like cornflakes or soda, which can be advertised as such and made available to a larger public, be that public tourists, artists seeking new spaces to work, the rich seeking new locations for reinvestment, or bohemians eyeing new experiences.

"In recent years image has become an important part of the city branding process. Just as image helps to market individual buildings and places, so it also markets cities as, if not productive, at least creative, interesting and attractive. The process of branding always merges developers' interests and consumers' desires with officials' rhetoric of growth; branding tries to make each city appear different from and better than the competition."[1] I wanted to talk to people who have seen the changes in the neighborhood over time, and I sought out one of the oldest residents, a man who has run a barber shop on 118th Street for forty years. I walked back down Adam Powell Boulevard a few blocks from where Craig does the sexton work, and I spoke with the man people refer to as the mayor of the neighborhood. His name is Mr. House, and before his story is told, I want to show a passage from *Growing up Poor*, a volume William Kornblum and I wrote about this same block and barber shop and life in the neighborhood:

> It's a chilly October evening in Harlem. On 118th Street off Seventh Avenue every other building is either bricked up, abandoned, or only partly occupied. The neighborhood to the east is in rapid transition, and the available housing stock is decreasing rapidly. There are two bright spots in the area, though. Harlem World, a huge disco—claimed to be the world's largest—is located on 116th Street across from the Muslim mosque. This is a new complex that caters to the teenagers and young adults. The other bright spot is the conversion of Graham Court, an elegant landmark that was the home of the black elite in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. It is being converted into cooperative housing, with many poets, writers, painters, doctors, and lawyers among the tenants. There are several new shops on the block as well—a flower store, a hardware store, a new restaurant, and new housing for the elderly under construction. These signs of vitality appear in sharp contrast to the unemployed teenagers who sit and stand and rap on the corners and stoops in the area.[2]

This excerpt reveals how the ethnographic overlap technique applies as some of the same people and locations are revisited over the years. In this case, the neighborhood changes are also captured, though many of the same issues from then are glaringly apparent today as teenagers search for work that does not exist and find drug/thug life to compensate, and still others can be found doing old vaudeville-type acts such as dancing the "tourist hustle." These forms of street entertainment can be found in the subway cars, on the streets around 59th Street and Central Park South, and of course in Harlem. If (teen) residents are being reduced to street performers, as one woman spoke about after seeing teenagers dancing in the street for tourists, then what is the role of development in aiding the young men and women in finding jobs in Harlem?

The question is, as one of my students once said, "Is the development of Harlem creating a viable and stable neighborhood or perpetuating the racist song and dance image that Harlem's African-American population has struggled to lose?" The Harlem Empowerment Zone and other components of development privilege Harlem entertainment (an entertainment made all the more viable because of millions of global tourists). The Harlem Empowerment Zone, formally known as UMEZ, or the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone, was created by Congressman Charles Rangel (who has been elected for his twenty-third term) back in 1970 after defeating Adam Clayton Powell in the 110th Congressional District (now the 113th). Rangel wrote the legislation for empowerment zones in distressed communities around the country in the hope of revitalizing poor neighborhoods. The initial funding of $300 million came from federal, state, and city coffers and had an initial goal of creating 23,000 new jobs in the area. Twenty years later, most of the money had been spent and only $55 million was left, and many argued, such as the local political leader A. Wilkins, that the money had not done as much as it should have, since only 8,000 jobs had been created, and the quality of those jobs was suspect. I talked to a local political aspirant about the situation in Harlem at the time:

> If the empowerment zone was supposed to help youths in the community and assist local businesses to stay in business and people stay in jobs that pay decent wages, then I don't think it reached its mission. Let me tell you this. The first director of UMEZ was . . . Donald Cogsville, no, that's not right, he was head of HUDC [Harlem Urban Development Corporation] and they got rid of him. I should say Governor Pataki got rid of him. No, it was Dick Parsons and Mario Baeza, who became chairman of it, but Debbie Wright, who was from Yale or Harvard MBA, took over as first head of UMEZ, all very capable executives though. Knuckles is the head of it now. But to be honest, I don't believe they got anywhere near the 23,000 jobs they set out to achieve. I don't think they eliminated much poverty either, but I can tell what they did do. They had a strictly

> market-driven or perhaps a better word would be market-oriented strategy. They believed business could do no wrong. They first eliminated the commercial rent tax north of 96th Street. Then businesses that came in got seed grants, and tax credits. But guess who those businesses were? They were the biggest and most profitable corporations on the globe. McDonalds, Rite Aid, Blockbuster Video, Gap, H&M, Popeyes, you name it. Did they think these corporations were gonna help Harlem teenagers out of poverty by offering them $5.00 an hour wages? Listen, people still need welfare to live if that's all they're gonna make.

He did get some information right, and this business-oriented approach the young man mentioned is part of the way government gets out of the business of poverty elimination and avoids doing social service agenda work, housing, public welfare, and the like—by leaving it all up to the private sector. The private sector executives have power over the agenda and are not elected; therefore, they have more control over local events than citizens in dictating policies.

The many small and large transmutations spoken about suggest not only that things are not as they once were but that the very character of the people has changed as well. Displacement emerges as a central issue along with gentrification, because people are removed not only from buildings but from life in the community itself—lost friends, lost associations, broken relationships of all kinds, all shattered because of the housing market decline. I argue that in order to understand the historical importance of these communities, it is crucial to trace movements within neighborhoods as well as cultural structures. Following are notes from West-Central Harlem that speak to this issue of change over time. Now we turn to Mr. House.

Mr. House and the Stoop

In Ray Oldenburg's (1989) *The Great Good Place*, he writes about the "third place," such as barbershops, the bar, or the neighborhood social club, and what could be added is the stoop, as each one is a key locale making for a civil society and setting up a sense of place outside the home and the workplace (the "first" and "second" places).[3] The third place is one of the moorings in the life of the neighborhood—the one that adds life to the public domain and fosters a more vibrant, less controlled interaction where you can express and establish a sense of self, independent of the other locations.

Today is Monday, and a slight breeze wafts through the air as the mugginess of summer is subdued for the moment. The streets are always busy as many people strut in and out of shops, and across is the stoop of Mr. House, one of the oldest residents in the neighborhood. He sits across from where the local hostel not two years old has been closed. European youngsters, backpacked and

standing about, smoke and chat as another group of six emerge from gypsy cabs and stroll along the avenue. After so many years of living, working, hanging out, and just being a part of this street, a person earns the right to call it "my street" or "my block," and this is exactly how Mr. House acts as he sits on his stoop. People honk as they pass in cars, and old and young folks wave or stop for a moment to shake his hand or extend greetings by tipping their hats or smiling, but most engage in extended conversation like what took place today.

Mr. House sits on his stoop at 118th between Seventh and Malcolm X Boulevard and points to the back side of a cast iron gate that leads to the rear of the building where his family stayed in an eight-room apartment for 66 years until 1984. He says, "The super tells me they're gonna close that building because the stairs are obstructing the passage ways and the hallways weren't built for all the people to pass through if there's a fire in there." He lives across the street from this building, now a youth hostel that brings in hundreds of young people from around the world. I wonder how he feels about neighborhood changes all around him.

"Well, partially," he admits, then he points to a back fence at the end of the street.

> You see that entranceway? Well, that's where the building I was raised in used to be before it was torn down. I see the gentrification as a good thing because it brought better housing, but on the contrary side it brought a lot of anguish to the community because they charging too much rent for these apartments now. They charging way too much for these storefronts now, too. These storefronts were all used by Afro-Americans for a long time. And was run by them, too. You understand? You see at one time we had about five barbershops in the same sector around here. We had three bars and each bar had their own clientele, man, you know what I mean? There was no enviousness because everybody was trying to help everybody. There was this generating of an economy going around here. Back in the day there was this man, a tall guy like you, nice looking dude, drove a beautiful Cadillac. He was Masonic. His name was Turk. He had a bar over here on Seventh Avenue, and on Monday he would have drinkers day, and people from all over would come to his bar to drink and he would buy the whiskey, like you buy one, he'd buy two for you. And that was the kind of businessman he was. And during the week, he'd go up from bar to bar, man. Smalls, man [Smalls Paradise, originally owned by the basketball great Wilt the Stilt Chamberlain], was one of the spots he went, and I went up to Smalls one night and the bartender told me the bar had three lines around it—and that the drinks were on Mr. Turk, you know, man, that's what the bartender told me.
>
> That was drinkers Monday. And Turk, he was the guy who could drink some whiskey. And we used to say he had the stomach of a camel. He could drink some *whiskey*. But you know, he was the nicest guy, man. The nicest guy and he was

> ahead of his times, man. Listen he was so lucky with numbers, so much so when the guys came to pay him off they'd come with shopping bags full of money to pay him off, and it was rumored that Turk had given the family of his wife money to buy blue chip real estate on Riverside Drive.
>
> His wife was White, he had nothing but White women, and they were all beautiful women, but Turk was a shrewd businessman. Turk lived to be about 95, something like that, even after drinking all that whiskey and stuff. And if he would have to put one of them rowdy cats out, one of them guys who was causing trouble, and later on in the week when he'd see that same guy in the park drinking, he'd go out there and say, "Hey man, what you drinking?" and he'd drink with them, whatever they were drinking, wine whatever, he'd drink with them. That was the kinda guy he was. So we had some great people around here running businesses before this gentrification stuff started. It's not like we needed all the business to go away, yeah there were some that needed help, but that don't mean they needed to be replaced for good.

But referring to the hostel, it did not stay open long after the super gave the closing warning, because a few weeks later, signs from the city buildings department were posted on the property. The place has been empty ever since. But instead of Black kids standing on the block before it closed, White kids from Europe and elsewhere were sitting on the stoop of the building, smoking, exchanging money, and studying maps of the city. Mr. House's grandfather was the superintendent of that building across the street from where we sat, and his father was a barber, and that's how he came into the trade in the first place. Born in South Carolina, his parents migrated to New York in the early thirties, and Mr. House arrived in Harlem as a small boy.

"I was born in 1936," he recalls.

> And my mother married again and started a second family. So my father came to Harlem without me at first. He was gone somewhere, I didn't know where at the time because I was just a little boy really, and so [my mother's mother] and my father's mother made a pact with my mother that if her mother should die first that I would come to live with my father's mother. So I came to New York when I was told at about two years old. I lived right there between 118th Street and 119th Street. It was two buildings that connected to each other, and my grandfather was the superintendents of these buildings. And when he became the superintendent of these buildings when the landlord switched, he left that job. But it was around that time my father opened up the barber shop. So we moved from the back of the building to this spot here.

I tell Mr. House about the super study and how supers and the changes they see in the neighborhood is one important concern, because as the neighborhood

changes, so does the job of the supers. I ask him what the most profound change is that he's seen after fifty years in this community.

> I would say the renovation or the gentrification of the community is the most profound changes I've seen. It has to be this change in the buildings. You see these buildings across the street? [He points to a row of buildings along Seventh Avenue from 118th to 119th Streets.]
>
> Those buildings were abandoned and vacant for at least 25 years before Mayor Dinkins [New York's first Black mayor] used his influence to start gentrification in here. And that was in the 1980s, by then they started renovating some buildings on this side and so forth and so on. Now the storefronts changed. The storefronts and the market stores when I was a kid were owned by Greeks and Italians. And so what happened was a man by the name of Joe Overton, who was deputy of A. Phillip Randolph, and he came from the A. Phillip Randolph club, and he started advocating that these front store merchants start hiring Black people. And that if they didn't hire no Black help, they had to go outta business. In other words, if they didn't hire Blacks, the community wouldn't buy at their store. They had to either hire Blacks or go outta business. So they started hiring. Now Adam Powell started all of this by telling White-owned businesses on 125th Street that same thing, but the White owners did something stupid: they hired only light-skinned Blacks, and that got Powell madder and he told them to hire all colored people or he'd have another boycott. He said our people come in all colors and that's who should be represented on that hiring.

Sociologist Elijah Anderson would refer to Mr. House as an "Old Head," or one of the many sages the ethnographer must recruit in order to get the historical record straight. Sitting on a chair he brought downstairs from his apartment for the occasion and wearing an open shirt and jogging pants, he is used to the attention, having been a subject of many books over the years, including one Bill Kornblum and I did 25 years ago. Though not mentioned by name in our book, he was part of the local community back then because his barbershop was the focus of community activity, both inside where men got haircuts and talked about every subject and outside where junkies nodded, people bought and sold drugs, deadly fights happened, kids like Kevin, a neighbor's little brother, were shot down, and Craig played the dozens with kids after school. Mr. House cut the hair of just about everybody over those years, ambassadors and African presidents, new arrivals from the continent here for a visit, gangsters and street punks, politicians and the like.

Mr. House continues:

> I should say that Powell was the most influential pioneer in Harlem life, because there were so many things he did. He not only advocated them but physically

> did them. He was there on the picket lines, protesting like everybody else, not sitting on his bully pulpit but down there in the trenches. He advocated that there be Black surgeons at Harlem Hospital, Black firemen in the fire department, Black policemen in the police department, and Black bus drivers at the depot. He advocated there be Black faces behind every counter where Black folk spent that money. You understand? Not only did he boycott department stores on 125th Street, but he said all phases of Black life need to be integrated and hiring had to happen in all those places where Blacks participate with their pocket books. I want to say that the only White-owned business at that time that didn't have any Blacks working on the premises was Frank's restaurant, and the reason why Franks didn't have no Black waiters or like that was, well Powell says he left Frank's restaurants out of the boycott thing because he wanted Black people to see how it felt to be served by White people.

Craig lives on this block and knows the man and his son, and for many years, he got his hair cut in House's barbershop on the corner. Gathering information from the oldest residents is a must for any community study, and to refer to Mr. House as many residents here do, as the "mayor" of this street, would not be doing an injustice to the narrative. He is one person who can speak to the changes taking place and that have taken place over the decades. "You know what they say, doc, an old man dying is like a library on fire." I have not heard that expression, and I ask if I can use it. Mr. House is a wise man and a person I've known for a many years, and he cut many heads in the hood until he sold his place and retired. His barber shop, ironically, is located on the ground floor of one of the buildings I owned with the consortium.

One of the new barber shops the kids hang out near and get haircuts at is open until two in the morning sometimes and is located on 116th and Seventh and is open seven days a week. The reason I like this one out of the many in the neighborhood is that it's open on Sunday. The neighborhood has many such shops: one around the corner across from Wyatt T. Walker church and another one just closed, Haitian Andre's—my old barber shop—between the block on 116th, and another one on 117th and Malcolm X Boulevard. The one I also presently attend has Dominican and Honduran cutters/barbers, but it is owned by a Bolivian man.

Every block, it seems, has a barber shop and/or a church, certainly the most popular and traditional of the institutions in the Black community. As a matter of fact, there are four hundred churches in Harlem proper and twice as many barber shops. The shop I frequent attracts some tourists, and it also is good because it's convenient. House's old barber shop has been replaced by Margarita's Beauty Salon, and the old candy store is now Diallos T-shirt operation.

The barbershop across the street has a sign that reads, "We mend the rips, patch the holes, build the heels, save the soles." And it could well be the same meaning for the churches down the street. The shop is a young person's space, since most of the patrons are teenagers, though an occasional older person can be seen getting a cut. What I find most interesting about the shop is the lack of talk there. In most of the other shops where I've been a patron, including the one I'm presently attending around the corner, there is lots of chatter and talk about sports, politics, and whatever is topical in the news. The cutters here are Haitian, including the women hair dressers, and I guess you could say it's a Haitian shop. I hear the patois spoken by both the barbers and some of the customers.

But the lack of talk might be due to the unfamiliarity with the customer and because one does not have a consensus of whose in the shop. I'm sure underneath the patois is talk about home, Haiti, politics there and here, and so on, but because they are unfamiliar with their customer base and the different language used, there isn't as much commonality among the customers. There is, when I'm there, a conversation or two about "the game," since a cable television is mounted in the far back wall high up so customers can see.

Back in the day, the old heads could be seen playing checkers outside the barber shops, but not these days. In Central Harlem, right outside in the street, there is the annual African American Day parade, an event when neighbors meet and talk, dress up or dress down, and look and gawk at the spectacle in the street. I see people I've not seen for a few years who stop by and make their way to the noisy throngs, dancing or singing gently or loudly through the crowd. Food is sold, trinkets too, like they do in the New Orleans Mardi Gras: t-shirts, African motifs and other wares, batteries by the battery man who lives in the building, records/CDs. Every group organization is represented in the parade: policemen, nurses, firemen, college fraternities, unions, local clubs, you name it. But the intensity of the parade is gone, somehow. There doesn't appear to be much excitement in the floats. The dancing and hoopla is not like a college bowl game; it's more like the downside of the funeral march in New Orleans. Over the years, it seems to have lost a step or two—lost a high step and picked up a low one.

American Notes

In this same neighborhood, a few streets down, a mysterious-looking building with a blue-colored material covering the windows stands out on the block. Two matured Black men sitting on a bench across the street say it was an after-hours clubs years ago, and one man says it was a famous landmark spot a very long time ago. In checking the story of it once being a famous venue, it turned out to

be true. The place is named after Almack's Dance Hall, which was located not in Harlem but in the Five Points section of New York, called "Little Africa" at the time, and the place was owned by a Black entertainer named Pete Williams. Charles Dickens toured the place during his visit to America and wrote about it in his book *American Notes*. This was in the pre–Civil War days, around 1842. Dickens noted,

> Our leader has his hand upon the latch of "Almack's," and calls to us from the bottom of the steps; for the assembly-room of the Five Points fashionable is approached by a descent. Shall we go in? It is but a moment. Heyday! the landlady of Almack's thrives! A buxom fat mulatto woman, with sparkling eyes, whose head is daintly ornamented with a handkerchief of many colours. Nor is the landlord much behind in his finery, being attired in a smart blue jacket, like a ship's steward, with a thick gold ring upon his finger, and round his neck a gleaming goldenw atch-guard.[4]

This new Almack's is a tiny nightclub that is one of the more recent gentrified businesses in the area. The owner, a tall Black man with a ponytail and an engaging smile named Fritz Williams, says he's happy to have a name with such historical importance. He asks if I want to support his place by buying a stool with my name affixed, part of a promotional plan to garner support for his club and to better connect himself to the community.

As Craig makes his way throughout the neighborhood, he boasts, "I know the water man, I know the bread man, I know the newspaper man because he gives me my newspapers for free. I know a lot of people around here, not because I work around here but because I've lived around here for most of my life. I know the people and the people know me." He did talk to me about the neighborhood at length and had some interesting things to say. He knows more than he leads on, because he's the receiver of gossip, rumors, and the occasional firsthand, straight-from-the-horse's-mouth accounts. He talks to a lot of people in the neighborhood. Also, his job as a sexton ties him to his community and puts him in the loop, so to speak, of social networks that are critical to the world of work on an informal and formal basis. For instance, he spoke about the block he lives on, which is 118th Street, the same as Mr. House's, and the place where Richard Parsons (former head of Time Warner and CEO of the Los Angeles Clippers basketball team) opened up Minton's, as well as where both Parsons and Alexander Smalls opened Cecil's restaurant, a thriving eatery for the Black elite. He says he got the news from a local politician from Graham Court. "That place will be depending on tourists from Japan and Europe, like that hotel over there, and White people or at least boughie [bourgeois] Black people, not people from the hood, I bet, who will be the only ones who can afford to spend

money there." Craig's assessment was seconded by the district leader, William Allen, who said, "They got gumbo in that restaurant that cost fifty dollars for two people, and that is too much money for working people to pay, so that means this is truly gentrification dollars in the neighborhood right now."

The block is quiet these days. Across the street on Seventh Avenue at 118th Street, a once-abandoned building is now the previously mentioned hostel that the super of the building says will close soon because of fire department violations. The hostel caters to what I can see are European teens and young people under 25. They come in packs, and at all times of day and night, one can see them moving about the street, speaking German, French, Swedish, or Italian. Not unfriendly, but certainly in their own world, they appear to be seeking both the "pseudo-event" and the real thing, but it's hard to know for sure. On Sundays, I can see they are here for the real thing, because a gaggle of them head for First Corinthians Baptist Church on 116th, rumored to have the best gospel choir in Harlem.

It must indeed be the best, because the tourists stand about seventy to one hundred deep to get into morning service, and then they scatter to all points of the city. At one time, they came in buses, and some still do, but now whole families come by subway and go from one church to another. Wyatt T. Walker's Canaan Baptist is on the list, a church between the avenues (Seventh and Malcolm X) on 116th, as well as the Soul Saving Station across from Magic Johnson Theater off Frederick Douglass Boulevard, a block from the next super I visit.

Being in the role of porter or super puts the person in a position of knowing the neighborhood and getting to know the people in it. The community surrounding the church is not yet completely gentrified, as many of the buildings are tenements, with only a smattering of co-ops, yet one can see the encroachment of new arrivals, this time with rich or wealthy Whites moving in, and every once-abandoned building will be either rehabilitated, flipped, converted into a co-op or condo, or individually owned.

A few weeks later, I saw Craig on the street as he was talking to a neighbor, Charlie, a man we both knew who was responsible for getting many young people into joint apprenticeship programs for the building trades, including my brother and I. He lives in the old building where Craig used to do the handyman work before they got rid of the super and the building turned co-op. Craig was subsequently rehired as the building porter.

Craig stops me in the street and proceeds to tell a joke: "A super goes into his building basement and accidentally falls into a cesspool. He starts screaming, 'Help! Help!' and nobody comes and he's sinking deeper and deeper into the sewage. Then he hollers, 'Fire! Fire!' And soon the fire department arrives, finds him, and rescues him. The firemen are annoyed because there is no fire, so they ask him, why did he yell 'fire' when there is no fire. Well, the man said, 'If I had

hollered, "Shit! Shit!" would you have come?'" I laugh, and he looks pleased and says he has another joke about baseball, but can't get the lines right. This joke telling is an important moment in my relationship with Craig, who happens to be sponsoring me, as it indicates a sense of friendliness and comfortableness at this stage in the research—though I'm not as comfortable telling him jokes, since I don't really know any. Though he and I have known each other for many years, we've never been to a bar or hung out as such. We are only "street friendly," you might say, and the only time he's visited my apartment was to advise me on installing a washing machine and dryer.

That day, however, he looked disheveled and may have been drinking; I don't know and didn't ask him about that. I think I should have but felt too embarrassed, but as I reflect on it, perhaps it would have been out of bounds on my part to have asked. There are times I don't want to ask certain personal questions, because it's really none of my business, though at the same time, in a way, it is, since I've gotten permission at this point in our knowing each other. But I have to ask myself, when is it impolite to overly inquire? There is perhaps a line I should draw here, and that is not to reveal everything that might prove hurtful to people. It's a thin line. I realize there comes a time when he and I should sit down and discuss some of the more serious aspects of the study itself; for example, whose story is this really about? Why should I include in the story only what I think is important? What should be kept out of the story? What are the negative sides of telling his story? We should discuss what is happening between us as participants in this process. A few days later, Craig stopped me in the street to tell me about the death of someone in the neighborhood I might know. "Did I tell you Mr. Lawrence died? You know him. He lived over there on 119th Street. They said he had a heart attack." It seems as if he has become the village crier, making pronouncements every time I see him. It was several weeks, however, before I saw him again, and when I did, he showed me a book and said he learned some of the same things (masonry, stone and mortar work) he was taught in the Kentucky Job Corps. The passage he showed me I just chalked up to him wanting me to see he was reading something interesting about buildings, because he knew of our mutual interest. Sometimes he and others in the neighborhood will occasionally tell me news of something I might have missed or if someone passed, especially if they think I might know the deceased. It is just one way of being neighborly. "I think cars, money, and success are the zombies of happiness. Friendliness should be the thing we all care about achieving," he says as he takes leave. I leave him and walk across the street to hail a gypsy cab. I'm late for an appointment on the other side of town.

When I first came to this neighborhood, abandoned buildings littered the blocks from 116th to 145th on the east and west sides. And along Eighth Avenue from 110th to 156th Street, buildings were boarded up. This was in

the 1970s and 1980s, when many otherwise structurally sound housing units provided low-cost housing to working families living in the center-city. But large segments of the low-cost housing stock deteriorated or were abandoned during the 1960–1970s, particularly in center-city neighborhoods. By the end of the 1980s, real estate values soared in most major metropolitan areas, so that formerly affordable housing was beyond the economic means of much of the population.

Affordable housing was unreachable for nearly half of the nation's Black and Hispanic families; 42 percent of all Black and Hispanic households spent more on housing in 1985 than is considered affordable, compared to 27 percent among Whites. Among poor minority households, nearly four out of five paid more for housing than the affordable amount.[5] Thus about 40 percent of poor Hispanic and Black households spent at least 70 percent of their income on housing in 1985, leaving little money for food and other necessities. Today, it is much higher.

Every old building spawns a better-looking one with new owners, who for the most part are not from the neighborhood. The buildings on the block west of the church where Craig works as Sexton, near 114th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, were boarded up and destined, at one point, to be torn down, but now they are being renovated because owners view renovation as a public relations strategy—that is, it is more politically correct to rehab a building than tear it down, because the community sees rehabilitation of older buildings as less demoralizing. It is also cheaper to rehab than build from the ground up. The buildings are getting taller, too, as many are adding extra floors. The old building on 109th Street and Broadway has had an entire new top floor affixed. People in the neighborhood see taller buildings as necessary.

> We need tall buildings in the city anyways because the population ain't gonna stay the way it is, and in New York you can't build low because there ain't enough land, so you gotta build high to accommodate all the people that's be coming here in the future. (pedestrian on Broadway)

> I think it's a mistake to think we only need to have buildings that fit the design of the neighborhood. We have to think bigger than that. The church [at 100th Street and Amsterdam] sold their air rights if I'm not mistaken for cash so that the guy could build that tower down there, and if the church thinks it's OK, then who am I to complain? (laundress at 100th Street and Broadway)

> Everybody around here believe that sooner rather than later these houses [Frederick Douglass projects on 102th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, one of the largest housing project complexes in the area] that we live in will be gone for the big

> skyscrapers like those on 100th Street and the other one on Broadway. They are not going to let poor Black and Latino people stay in the middle of Manhattan, because the real estate is too valuable. (Douglass Houses tenant)

> Whatever they build around here can only be good for the neighborhood, because much of what you see now is not that great. This used to be a wonderful neighborhood, but the people in the projects and the gang violence has eroded what was once a nice place to live. I think any new, big buildings will help bring back some sense of pride and help the neighborhood grow and prosper. (Spanish restaurant patron)

Regardless of the height of newer buildings, millions of dollars go into renovation, and some of these constructions, I might add, are noteworthy and still architecturally attractive. The block between 113th and 112th Street happens to be next to a vacant lot and across from, and back of, another church that is not gentrified; these churches act as permanent features, landmarks if you will, in the community.

The Super as Neighborly

The super can be neighborly, especially if they see themselves as such. Take Tolton, who defines a neighborly person as someone who knows the neighborhood as well as the neighborhood knows them. A tall, medium-build man with a warm smile and easy disposition, Tolton speaks freely and has an intelligent way about him. He is articulate and charmingly political, and he mentions family and neighborliness as absolute virtues he admires and cares deeply about.

> But this is what I do. Last summer I buy two barbecue grills. I got them in my backyard and set them up. And this year it was so nice, I had so many people come by for the barbecue. And when the kids be coming to go off to college and I give the last barbecue for them, too. It good for the super to be this neighborly person way, cause he make people feel like he care for them like they care for me. I didn't come here to pull no garbage thing, but then one day I'm down in the garden [the area where we are sitting is a patio and the vegetable garden is directly adjacent] and I'm doing this and that, and while they [tenants] arguing about this or that, I just say things will be all right if you listen to each other and not fight each other. This is what the super do. This is what I do . . .

During the conversation, someone else passes by and says hello to the super, and he says, "Hey, hey how you doing? They be my neighbors, you know." As we make our way to the garden, we run into Lancero, one of the handymen Tolton supervises, a short man with a pleasant smile who gladly shakes my

hand. I explain that we (the photographer and I) are here to speak to Tolton about his work. Lancero says something to the effect that the type of work he and Tolton does is fast disappearing. Tolton sits down on a bench as people come by passing along the edge of the shoulder-high enclosure. A large garden filled with tomatoes, peas, okra, and other vegetables abuts the building. The garden where we sit is a communal space. Tolton speaks of his background:

> I'm originally from Trinidad, and I'm the last one of nine in my family. And after years of going to finishing school there and after some family break up, I eventually get a trade job. In my hometown, there is a man who go around looking for kids who want to learn by a trade, and he choose me and I end up working in a furniture factory and I end up enjoying that work. So from there I start to do much with my hands by fixing things. And I begin doing that when I was 15 years old. And I keep doing that job until I was 18 years old. And I go into con-struc-tion on the island, I evolve into trafficking. Trafficking is we traffic goods. T-shirts mostly, we traffic from one country to another. Tolton went to Panama, Curacao, Venezuela, eventually got to the United States.
>
> So I get into the same goods that are needed here and I come here for that reason. And I was told by me sister that I never finished school back home and this was basically what a child needs to do. But you see this was a problem, because the life I lived back home and the life I live here, there is no balance, you see. These are two different things, you see, because the life you live here is like a bullet out of a gun.

He points his forefinger, as if pulling a trigger.

> And back home is like, the other side to that, you know, it's like, let's see how long this snail can take to cross the road. And with that pace now, and I come here, you have to work and go to school, that is the balance here, you see. So I choose working rather than going to school. You must remember that America is a gateway from a little island. It wasn't a dream for me to come here. It's no dream to own things, because you ask someone and they say if I want a house, I can go and own me a house on the island.

Tolton has been in New York since 1983, spending only one of those years in Brooklyn. He speaks about the idea of neighborliness:

> The other ting I want to tell you is that when I came here, I was a neighborly person, and in the only ting you have to do to be a neighborly person is do something that we used to do back home, and that I make a drink for the people. Let's say I would gather a blender. I get bananas, I get wheat germ, and I get milk . . . and they say, "What you make, a ice cream?" and I say no, I make a fig punch. I

> get canned Carnation milk, wheat germ, nutmeg, vanilla, some ice, sour bitters, and can put a ripe avocado, some rum or brandy, too.

The building Tolton works in is a multistory structure on a busy block, located diagonally to a police precinct (the twenty-third) on Frederick Douglass Boulevard, around the corner from a newly built Aloft hotel. There are several restaurants, a small coffee and donut shop, and a bistro nearby, and directly in front of his building is the Ghanaian Presbyterian Church. Since we are meeting on Sunday (the only day he was available to show me around and visit his buildings), I notice church-going parishioners decked out in full African Ghanaian *batakaris* worn by men and large beautiful headdresses of flowing, colorful, embroidered fabric worn by women. The parishioners are in their Sunday best as they pose for pictures on the front steps of the former Police Athletic League center, and every so often a man or women or a group will stop for a second, wave, say hello to Tolton, and walk on. This is a neighborhood where the super is not just a super but a neighborly person. For him, being neighborly means caring for people in the neighborhood, and work and neighborliness go hand in hand.

Work can be defined in a multidimensional way if we consider it as an "activity that produces something of value for other people."[6] This definition expands the notion of what work is and places it within a much broader social context. To work is to have a purpose. We are quite aware that Craig as a kid selling drugs on the street was certainly working, though extralegally. We also know the man taking care of the kids and cleaning the house is really working, whether he is paid for that effort or not. They are both being productive for other people in the community. The drug-dealing teen is providing relief for those who need the illegal substance he peddles, and the husband who does the work of the family while the wife works a regular job may not be remunerated but is nevertheless still working.

Sociologist E. C. Hughes writes about work, "A man's work is one of the more important parts of his social identity, of his self; indeed, of his fate in the one life he has to live, for there is something also as irrevocable about choice of occupation as there is about choice of mate."[7] As I leave Tolton and move into South Harlem, I should point out that though I wanted to have supers who worked in buildings of a certain dimension, this turned out not always to be the case, as you can see from Craig. But with that said, supers also often make "side money" by working odd jobs outside the perimeter of the their home buildings. Tolton and Craig spoke about this when they took me to the buildings they work in.

I had a friend who used to come here, another super who gave me some advice about what I should not be doing: don't mess with those drug people and

just work, work, work. Every time I see him, he says, "Go island, go," because he asked me where I'm from, and I used to always like him for that, because he did not want to see me get into any trouble when I first came here.

My job as ethnographer is to "shadow" my subjects wherever they go, and sometimes that works out fine and sometimes it does not. Athena L. allowed time from her busy work schedule to tell me about her life as a super in the city.

The Woman Super

It was the coldest day of the year, and my appointment with the super was to be the last in a series of interviews covering six years. The person I was to meet arranged a parking spot for me at the building, and as I drove up, she came out to direct me into the lot. Athena had agreed to our meeting only a few days earlier, and she said I could park near her building. She came out in boots and slacks with a green Parisian scarf around her neck, her curly hair flowing over her face, and a warm smile to greet me. We talked in her basement office with two floor heaters blasting away the cold air seeping through the service elevator shaft. She obliged me with the following details and personal account.

> I was born in Portugal, though I'm not Portuguese. My mother is Czechoslovakian, and my father is Venezuelan. I grew up in New York City. My parents met when in Portugal, where he worked for the airlines. He was stationed there and worked for [Pan American Airlines]. I must say that most of my growing up was here in New York City because I came back when I was young. And I want to say that I was a daddy's girl, but I was a mommy's girl, too. I'm very fortunate, because I picked good parents. [smiles] I chose them wisely.

She proceeded to tell me about how her dad had allowed her to play with his tools as a little girl and when he'd leave his tool box around the house, he would find her playing with the various instruments when he came home. Though she had an older brother and two other sisters, it was she who loved to play with tools and became intrigued with the mechanisms of gadgets, all of which was endearing to her father, who was an airplane mechanic. It wasn't long before her interest in tools became somewhat of a hobby, and after much encouragement from her father, who taught her to appreciate the beauty of mechanical contraptions, utensils, and appliances, she began to apply for jobs.

> My father was a mechanist with Pan American, so he worked with his hands. He fixed everything in the house, and it was very unusual to see anyone doing any kind of repair work in the home, because he did everything. And I was fascinated with his tools, those were my playthings. I just loved to play with them. I knew

his tools, and he didn't mind me at all being by his side, and he was an excellent teacher. A natural instructor. He would tell me this is the right way to do it and don't be a bum and do it the wrong way, the sloppy way.

And my mother was also quite talented in her own right, since she was a dressmaker. And I say dressmaker as opposed to a seamstress, because as a dressmaker, that is construction in and of itself. She made slipcovers for her sofas and chairs out of nothing. No patterns or nothing. She just knew how to construct form-fitting slip covers. She had that kind of know-how. Unfortunately she was not the kind of educator my father was. And I had an interest also in sewing, but she was very nervous; she didn't want me to hurt myself using the machine.

We had an old Singer [sewing machine], and it was outdated back then, that she had to finagle to get it to work right, and so she thought I might injure myself, so she didn't want me to play on it. So I don't really have that skill. But she did teach me hand sewing, embroidery and mending, and that sorta thing. The same thing with cooking. She didn't have the patience. She would be in the middle of cooking or baking, or whatever it is, and once in a while she might say, well, I do this or that in that order or this, that, or the other, but for the most part, she just wanted us kids to get out of her hair. But out of all of them [her siblings], I'm the only one who has the mechanical skills or interest in things mechanical. I just always loved it because it was game to me, to learn how to do these things.

The basement was nondescript and cold with fenced-in objects I was told belonged to the various tenants in the building. The room where the interview was conducted was warmer than the outer basement proper because two floor heaters kept the place warm. The desk held a few scattered papers, a lamp, and assorted stacked boxes in a back corner. The photographer, waiting to snap a few photos, sat slightly to the back of the room. Athena was methodical and articulate in her responses. Her countenance was serious as she waxed eloquently and passionately about her early life at home and her first jobs. And though she tried to be diplomatic, claiming to be both a daddy's girl and a mommy's girl, it soon became apparent that she was a bit partial toward her father.

I was always handy because I did the work with my father. So one year during a school break, somebody told me about a locksmith job, and I thought, who can't install a lock? So I went to the guy and he said, "Where did you work before?" and I said never but believe me I can install a lock.

And the way he hired me was, he says, "OK, I'm only gonna give you $50 dollars (or whatever it was), but you show me you know what you're doing and I'll give you a little bit more every week." He trained me in doing and handling, setting up alarms because I had no experience in doing that, but just about everything else I could do. And true to his word, I never asked the man for a raise not once, because every week, he would give me extra money. And he would give

me more and more. And if we had a great week, he would give me an extra fifty bucks.

I must say he was great mentor and, just like my father, a wonderful educator. Whatever was in his head, he couldn't wait to share it with someone that cared. Some of that work involved my having to correct a lot of the mess other supers made. I would say, "Will you stop letting those supers touch this stuff, they are butchers." I used the language of my father, I would say they are shoemakers—they're butchers, not mechanics with skills. So they said, "What about you? Why don't you do this job?" And I said no, no, no, I'm studying art, that's my thing. I'm not a janitor or a super. And then I came across the opportunity to work part-time as a super. It was no pay.

Athena got the opportunity to do her first job as a super, a chance she did not want to miss.

And I discussed it with my dad and he thought it was a tremendous opportunity, because I was in school then and this will gave me a fantastic opportunity to save money. I get a free apartment and all my bills paid for. He told me to take the job for one year. Save all my money for a year, then I can reevaluate whether I want to do photography or whatever. Remember, I had to work outside, because they considered it part-time. Well, I was not expecting to stay. I sort of felt like it was like going to prison. I gave myself 18 months and I would be gone. You know, I stayed in that building for 8 years. I really loved it. I really did. But when I left, I was able to get into Pan American [Airlines].

She rubbed her face, blinked her eyes, stroked her chin, and then, in a more reflexive tone, talked about her father with reverence. The more she talked about him, the quieter her hands became.

And like my father, I was able to work there. And you know, we grew up in a kind of Air Force base, because Pan American had a presence in Portugal in the Azores Islands. I was always around airplanes and airplane guys, mechanics, and all the guys with tools. All of this stuff was second nature to me. I must say I been around these kinds of tools since birth, because my dad would take me to work with him and babysit me. He'd put me up in one of the overhead bins or something and he'd be working and I'd be sleeping while he worked. I was always in that environment. You could say that was our backyard. It was literally our backyard.

So here in the states as I got a bit older, I always said I wanted to work for Pan American. But of course I didn't wanna work as a flight attendant like my sister would have loved to do, but as a mechanic, you know, one of the guys. But he [Dad] said women can't do that. "They will not hire a woman" is what he said. It just wasn't done; this was not an option. There was no precedent

> for it. And then they did start to hire some women. And my dad said, "I don't want to see you working there." He said because those women are going through a hard time. The men there give them a hard way to go. He said, "It would hurt me to see you in that environment." And out of nowhere I got this phone call, while I was working at this super's job, and he said, "Can you get here tomorrow?" because they are hiring ten more women in the industry at Pan American, weird, I don't know what, but they were hiring these women in what they call the fleet service. It was ten more women they wanted, but something had to have happened, because there was a lawsuit filed by NOW [National Organization of Women]. But I was thrilled and I went down the very next day, had an interview, and I don't know how quickly, but there were about one hundred women and they all heard about it from family members, a brother, an uncle, a dad, somebody in the family, so they did hire about ten of us that day.

This work at the airlines gave Athena a bold, newfound confidence that she could do almost anything mechanical and the super's job was an occupation she could certainly do well at if given the chance. The airline job also made her see the value of continued learning, which she endeavored to champion as the ideal model for a well-rounded super to maintain and to take advantage of.

The Eviction Blues

Ralph Ellison in his classic *Invisible Man* records an eviction in progress:

> "I don't care who they are, they got no business putting these old folks out on the sidewalk."
>
> "You mean they're putting them out of their apartment?" I said. "They can do that up here?"
>
> "Man, where you from?" he said, swinging towards me. "What does it look like they puttin' them out of, a Pullman car? They being evicted."[8]

The role the super plays in an eviction is minimal, a coconspirator at most, an innocent bystander at least, since the entire eviction situation is on the landlord and the tenant, whose transgressions may include nonpayment of rent or other egregious matters. If it is past-due rent, the tenant is served a five-day notice, and a court appointment is rendered that the tenant must comply with (within that five-day period) or be evicted. But here the super may play a role. For example, if a tenant is not paying rent because promised repairs are not being made in the apartment, then the super is responsible for getting those repairs done. A housing inspector comes to see if the tenant complaints

regarding those repairs are done satisfactorily. Usually these repairs are hinged on rent increases once such repairs are completed, and the landlord relies on the super to convey whether they are done or not. The super may or may not complete the repairs, yet may inform the landlord that they are done. The landlord almost never actually visits the apartment to see if repairs are completed, though on occasion they might.

The tenant may or may not allow the landlord entry in any event, though by law the landlord or the super should have keys to every apartment. A landlord can enter in an emergency to make repairs, to provide agreed upon services, and to show the apartment to potential tenants, but unless it is an emergency, the landlord must give 24-hour notice in writing of the date, time, and purpose of their visits and must schedule entry during normal business hours from Monday to Friday. The super will often relate to the landlord whether the necessary repairs were completed. Once repairs are done (and if a complaint has been raised), a housing inspector makes a visit back to the apartment in question to determine if the repairs meet the housing authority guidelines. If they do, then the landlord is given the right to raise the rent accordingly, but if not, the tenant has a right not to pay the increase, and the two are bound to housing court to have the case adjudicated by a judge. There are mitigating circumstances, and landlords often play tricks to get tenants out of apartments or to have them pay higher rents. One example was told to me by a tenant in a West Harlem building in an area undergoing gentrification. The woman had been in the apartment for 12 years and was aware of other tenants being harassed by the landlord trying to get them out. This is particularly true of older tenants, of which, she said, there are many in her building.

> When the landlord came in to replace the windows in the building, tenants were warned by the tenants association not to allow it, because it was a scam, since our hundred-year-old wooden windows, built by master Italian workers back then and paid for by some rich millionaire, was solid and just needed caulking, not replacing. After the windows were finally installed, it was not even a year later, cracks could be seen around the edges of the new windows. We had been had. This was typical of what happens when the landlord wants to increase rents and get people out. The building just two decades earlier had been bought for $20,000 and was now worth $20 million. But he's got other tricks, like he tried to pull that five-day notice scam on some of the old people in the building and me and my son.

The tenant complained the five-day notice was a "trick" because it was really a two-day notice, since the process server came at ten o'clock on Thursday night

and the following Tuesday was the court date. This meant the weekend was counted as days when only weekdays should be considered.

In his book *In Search of Respect*, Philippe Bourgois notes that

> according to New York City's housing regulations, window replacement counts as a capital improvement that landlords are allowed to pass onto their unsuspecting tenants at several times the real cost through strategic—but perfectly legal—bookkeeping. It represents one of the only ways for landlords to bypass New York's strict rent stabilization and family eviction laws, and force tenants out of their buildings by raising rents rapidly. Fringe areas between very wealthy and very poor neighborhoods, like East Harlem's southern border with New York's Silk Stocking Upper East Side around 96th Street are precisely the kinds of interstitial zones vulnerable to these gentrification schemes.[9]

Tricks are played by both parties, and the tricks played by tenants are revealed in another book.[10] Next, however, is another situation involving the five-day notice. I inquired of two older tenants in a building in East Harlem, a husband and wife who had received a five-day notice. They were sitting at Housing Court at 111 Centre Street in lower Manhattan. I asked what the initial reason was for the five-day notice. The woman spoke first:

> This whole thing started too long ago to even talk about, but this is the fourth time an inspector has been in our apartment over the past few years, and we find it appalling that the landlord has consistently lied on his application. I find it absolutely unbelievable that the resources of the city are being spent on new inspections each time the landlord lies and says he has completed the work. We recently found mice droppings in our bed because the floor boards in our bedroom have not been replaced as stated in our application. The inspector has shown over and over again that the apartment has not been properly painted or plastered, or the floorboards repaired. The bathroom ceiling remains unpainted, and still falling plaster showers us each time we sit on the toilet. The kitchen walls are still unpainted and show signs of falling plaster because of uncompleted work by the landlord.

When I asked what work the landlord had done, her husband, sitting quietly but looking more concerned, intervened: "What do you mean what did he do? He does what he usually does, which is nothing."

The woman sat up and interjected,

> I wonder how long it will take for the city to stop the charade and give us a final judgment against the landlord, who by the way, is so bold as to keep sending the wrong amount of rent due each month on our rent bill because he knows one day

> we or the city will desist in our efforts for proper redress. You see, he will keep sending the wrong amount so we will not pay it and then he will take us to court after it reaches a certain amount and say we owe him this amount. But we are aware too of his game and I will tell this to the judge.

I was curious about the role of the super in all this. "The super?" The woman looked up with a pained look on her face, and her husband just shook his head. She said,

> Well, the super is the one who should be doing the work and telling the truth about the conditions in the apartment, but you are not going to get the super to testify against the landlord, let's be realistic. After all, he works for the landlord, not for the tenants. But I should say that now, after several years, yet another inspection is due, and nothing is done in the apartment regarding the completion of repairs, and "Rip-Off Management" has continued to provide false statements of completion when nothing is actually being done to satisfy either us or the city. By the way, these false statements, do you know who provided that information to the landlord? Well, his precious super, that's who.

In many ways, the super is caught in a no-win situation. On the one hand, he has to do what the landlord tells him, and on the other, he has to keep the tenants somewhat appeased. Frank, the Eastside super, argues that he does not have to please his landlord so much as please himself, a statement I found rather difficult to fathom. Frank said, "I know this might sound funny, but we have never had an eviction like the ones you usually hear talk about, and our landlord is the city. Now, don't misunderstand me, we have had to get people out of here, but not like you think. The city issues a special order, and a marshal is given the order, and we serve the person, who has a certain time to leave, and in every instance, the person leaves voluntarily. You see, in this place, you don't have to kick people out." I tried to find information on this city special order he spoke about and could not find anything. When I went back a month later to talk to him about this, he said he did not remember the conversation.

The super is seen as a human being with all the troubles, foibles, joys, and issues we all face in our daily lives. The human being as super is the heart of this book, which attempts to capture the everyday life of the super as a person, a family person, a religious person, a woman in work clothes, and a mother dealing with children issues in a changing neighborhood. I also note some super-related paradoxes of the profession, such as the power they hold over people who have so much more education and status than they. Most supers have little formal education but feel superior to tenants in their buildings. Here supers are

less agents of change and more agents of continuity, because they have to walk a fine line between being a tenant (most or all live on the premises where they work) on the one hand and being an employee of the landowner on the other. As a matter of fact, it is the law that supers must reside in the building they superintend. Supers walk such a line because they have to get along with both tenants and landowners.

CHAPTER 3

A Day in the Life

Sharif and Allan

The supers you are about to meet work in different types of buildings; some are older apartment houses, some are commercial buildings, others are newer condominiums or cooperatives, and a few contain both co-op and rent-stabilized tenants. Allan works in a twenty-story co-op, while Athena has worked in both commercial and residential, though most of the other supers (Larry, Frank, Flynn, Tolton, and Kelly) operate out of regular apartment buildings, either rented flats and co-ops or condos.

Today I make good an appointment to see the "Hollywood super," and we sit in an Italian restaurant on Broadway talking about his life, his loves, and his job as super. The building he serves is a pre-WWII grand building on West End Avenue. He reminds me that the gentrification process began in this neighborhood some years ago.

Sharif

The "Hollywood super" got his nickname from a former tenant who introduced us, commenting on how he loves Hollywood movies and dresses like the Hollywood movie stars he idolizes rather than like a super. Sharif is perhaps the most intriguing of the supers, because he does everything to appear as if he is not a super, in his dress, style, body language, attitude, and professional self-conception, and he admits to being more of a supervisor of other personnel than a super. He is different from, though similar to, what sociologist Ray Gold would call a janitor—a description Sharif vehemently disavows. "The nature of the janitor's situation has led him to play roles and incorporate self-conception which frequently overshadows those which others expect of a combination caretaker and handyman. Because he does not work under direct supervision and can plan his work to suit himself, he feels that he is his own boss; he alone is

in charge of the building and responsible for the safety of the tenants."[1] How Sharif came to be part of the study is the way fieldwork often begins, with a bit of serendipity, a chance meeting here, a bit of ethnographer's luck there, or any of the other terms one uses to describe the process of getting in or getting around in the field.

Super duties do require training, mechanical and technical, either from a school (as the super on the East Side noted) or through self-teaching, as Sharif relates on the West Side. But the superintendents like him, for all intent and purposes, no longer perform most of the work in a building, and in fact, he acts more like supervisor, a foreman to others. He no longer regularly pulls the garbage, for instance, though he may on occasion, particularly when no other workers are available, and he can be seen throwing salt or shoveling snow in an emergency. Supers may also do plumbing and or electricity-related jobs, as well as painting and plastering apartments in a tight situation when help is wanting. But the majority of this work is increasingly performed by trusted assistants. The super becomes part entrepreneur, part administrator, and only part-time super.

I talked with a student who once lived in a building in the study area, telling her about my need to find supers between 96th Street and 125th, and she informed me that her super would be perfect. "You will love this guy because he's just great. The way he dresses, the way he talks, everything. And because he lives in that area and would make a great subject because he's from Albania and is very different from most supers. As a matter of fact, he loves everything American, especially Hollywood movies. I think he feels superior to many of the tenants because he dresses like them. You wouldn't know he's the super, and you wouldn't know his wife is the super's wife either."

Supers and No Uniform

While the uniformed doorman guards a building entranceway as the first line of defense to protect the tenant, the superintendent is the dividing line between the public view and intimate privacy. And Sharif, like the other supers interviewed here, does not wear a uniform nor a color symbolic of the profession, like the doctor in white, the pilot in navy blue, or the McDonald's service worker in yellow. "The uniform designates a group," Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex write. "One does not simply wear blue, white, or khaki; instead one's dress indicates membership in a police force, medical group, or military service. Because of its identification with a group, the uniform assumes the properties of totemic emblem and embodies the attributes of a group."[2]

The super is inside all the time and knows and sees tenants at their most vulnerable. Sociologists John Logan and Harvey Molotch point out in their book *Urban Fortunes*, "Physical distance is a priority for the well-to-do and when that's not possible social distance is purchased via doormen, chauffeurs, private cars, electronic security systems, garages, private clubs and exclusive restaurants."[3] At the same time, doormen, garage attendants, and delivery and maintenance staff are in a special place to tell us something about the people who make up the building, the tenants, who in turn tell us something about the neighborhoods, about the city, about class and gentrification, about race, as well as other matters of import. The following account is from another interview I conducted during my fieldwork.

The garage manager is a fifty-year-old Puerto Rican who has been at his job for more than twenty years. He is a charming man with slightly graying hair who moves with a quick step, whose demeanor is businesslike but pleasant. The garage itself has a history, since it was built as one of the many complexes that replaced the original African market after the controversial dismantling of African and African American street vendors along the 125th Street corridor by police on orders from the irascible (and some community residents say, racist) Mayor Rudolf Giuliani (2001–12). Once African Americans were forced out of the street locations on 125th Street, this building where the garage now sits became a vacant lot. Blacks called it a concentration camp and refused to set up shop there in defiance of Giuliani and essentially dispersed. Many of the Africans were associated with the 116th Street mosque on the southwest corner of the street, with which Malcolm X was affiliated. The mosque was burned to the ground following his assassination in 1965 at the Audubon Ballroom in Washington Heights. The African contingent of vendors decided to set up shop here for a short time, but they eventually shifted and moved to their present location on the southeast side, opposite the mosque, establishing the African Mart. The vacant lot soon became the home of what is called Renaissance Plaza, hailed at the time (1999) as a $60 million dollar mixed-use project for median-income households, which for Harlem was around $33,000 at that time. But the price for a two-bedroom one-bathroom apartment in the complex started at $150,000 with a monthly maintenance fee of $1,165, a cost wildly prohibitive for the vast majority of local residents. The original plan called for 241 moderately priced co-op apartments with ground-floor leases for corporate concerns such as Rite Aid, Petland Discounts, Ashley Stewart Women's Clothing, and Imperial Parking, to which our present conversation is obliged.

The manager and his assistant granted an interview to discuss what they consider increasing encroachment by corporations, real estate moguls, and rich investors into the neighborhood. They point out how brownstones, which

were moderately priced ten years ago, now are in the millions and that rent-controlled apartments are quickly becoming a thing of the past. The way many residents see their future is "either to move in or move out." The first to speak is the manager of Imperial Parking. "They [the gentrifiers] are making it hard for working people like me to live in this neighborhood. As we speak, there is talk of building another high-rise right over there." He points to property once owned by Salvation and Deliverance Church. During the course of this research, another high rise has been constructed sitting cheek by jowl with the garage. He continues:

> The rents are too high, bad economy don't help. I live on 132nd Street and in my building they have apartments going for $1,800 bucks. Can you believe that? I mean for two bedrooms. I was born and raised around here though, right there on 103 and Lex. But what you see now is business people moving up here, Russians moving up here now, this place is becoming really integrated now but I don't believe they vote democratic. Me, voted for Obama because I want to see progress but not digression. You understand. You digress when you force people out of their own communities because they can't pay the high rents. You don't progress because people eventually get angry at the government for allowing these bad things like unemployment to happen. Because let's face it, it don't happen to rich people. Rich people always have a way to save a dollar and make a dollar. I believe Obama will help make things better for the working man. He's doing that with health care and education. But in this city, the landlord is king. The landlords get everything they want. If they wanna raise your rent, they get it raised. If they want to end rent control, they find a way to get rid of rent control. The landlords have more power than the mayor, because they got the real estate lobby behind them, and all that does is make it hard for the working people.

Standing nearby is a regular garage attendant, Ghanaian by birth, who has been in the country 12 years—his tenure as attendant, six. He lives in the neighborhood and is a 39-year-old, affable, hard worker. His first lament concerns the high cost of living in the neighborhood these days:

> [Worker Attendant:] Rents are high here, and everybody who lives here is pressured to pay more, as rich people move in, poor folk move out. Things are still changing in some ways but not in others. Kids I see dropping out of school and staying behind on that. But as the neighborhood is going in one way with appearances that look good, the people here are not doing so good. The only buildings you see now, they be condos and co-op type buildings. The power the city has given to landlords because they forgot about the people. The people who don't have anything are pushed out.

> [Manager:] You must remember in the seventies if you went through hard times, you could get help. But not now. I know now lots of people who left the old neighborhood because they can't make it. I have seven brothers and sisters and they all left, went back to PR, and they have houses over there now. But they couldn't make it in this town anymore. Today the kids have to work. In order for the family to live comfortable, the kids have to work, too. But suppose you don't got no kids? What happens then?

Sociologists Neil Smith and Sharon Zukin have both written about displacement and city gentrification. Zukin writes about how market-led development strategies are essentially antipoor and in many ways antiurban as well.[4] Neil Smith uses the term "consumption spaces"[5] for places like the African Mart across the street from the garage and other culinary spots in the neighborhood, such as the popular Amy Ruth's Soul Food restaurant, famous for presidents and other celebrities dining there. Bill Clinton happened to have an office nine blocks away. Amy Ruth's is across from the Renaissance Plaza where the manager and the Ghanaian garage attendant work. Harlem churches in the area are also heavy tourist attractants—both Wyatt Walker's Canaan Baptist and First Corinthians Baptist serve as tourist locales where entertainment is to be exploited. But this is not the way local merchants see it all. They see dollars, and the more tourists, the merrier. As any store owner, church official, or restauranteur will tell you, it is tourists who keep the local Harlem economy going. As one store owner said, "Without the tourists, the neighborhood would dry up." This may not be entirely true, but it is well known that the millions of tourists who descend on Harlem every year are extremely important to the local Harlem economy. A church official who wished to remain anonymous (though I wasn't quite sure why) said,

> You asked about the food pantry and you know we [First Corinthians Baptist Church] have been running that for now about twenty some odd years. Well, that food pantry where we feed a thousand people every time we open up with fresh food, fresh vegetables, milk, and other products—well, that food pantry is basically paid for by the tourist money we get. The parishioners do pay for some of that, don't misunderstand me, but the vast majority of that money for that food comes from the tourists. Of course, we can do a lot more with the money, I mean, in the neighborhood than we are currently doing, especially around these kids, and then acquiring some of this property before it's all gone to super sky high. But you didn't hear that from me.

But the issue of buying property takes us back to the discussion of supers and how the super is in a privileged position in the neighborhood. A change in the status of the super reveals that a new class has arrived—a different group

of people have entered the neighborhood. The super lives in a semianonymous state, often housed literally in the building basement, coming out occasionally to fix this or that, have a brief conversation with this tenant or that, but for the most part, the super will be alone in the apartment so designated for him. He or she will carry out the day-to-day routine of keeping the majority of the tenants in the building safe and basically content.

Like most supers, neither Sharif nor Allan wears a uniform on the job, but Sharif's more elegant street attire does in fact act as a symbol of his superior role as supervisor and boss and is akin to the practice of foremen wearing felt hats while laborers or subordinate workers wear billed caps. It could be argued that the super is the face of the organization, in that the landlord relies on him to appease the tenant, who is in essence the "customer" in any service-type business. And in that regard, the super is responsible for making or keeping the customer happy. Allan wears a common man outfit, with work boots, khaki trousers, and a work shirt. Kelly wears her overalls and sneakers when she's engaged in any of the "dirty work" in the building, and Larry, Tolton, Flynn, and Athena can be seen attired in work clothes as well.

Nonservice occupations, such as those of supers and janitors, still involve face-to-face interactions between personnel and customers, even if only for a

short time, and people expect to see them in traditional gear. Emotional labor helps make the job supers do more effective "by regulating interaction and obviating interpersonal problems."[6] These nonservice jobs involve frequent "visits" to tenants apartments as the super makes the "rounds" to respond to tenant demands and complaints, and thus since these visits involve responsiveness, credibility, trustworthiness, access or approachability, communication and understanding, all this suggests that the nonservice encounter is essentially a social encounter and that tenants have expectations about what differentiates a good super from a bad one and a good building from a bad one. And while dress is taken into consideration, it is not the important thing; getting the job done is the most significant act.

These matters are all part of what tenants feel make a good building, and the super's behavior toward them is high on their priority list. The super has to be responsive, courteous, and trustworthy and understand the tenants' side of the story and not just the landlord's.[7] But the super has other considerations and must make judgments as to who should be prioritized, the landlord or the tenant, and in this way must be somewhat deceptive in his actions. This is what Hochschild refers to as "surface acting," which is essentially "simulating emotions that are not actually felt, which is careful presentation of verbal and nonverbal cues, such as facial expression, gestures and voice tone."[8] This is basically what tenants refer to as "bullshitting." As Frankfurt argues, "The bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts or about what he takes the facts to be. What he does necessarily attempt to deceive us about is his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way, he misrepresents what he is up to."[9] One tenant put it this way:

> He [the super] is basically a liar, because he comes up here and tell me and my husband that he's gonna plaster the walls in the rooms. This is so he can tell the landlord all the work has been done and the rent increase can go through. He tells me to my face that this will be done on Monday. Okay, Monday comes and goes by; Tuesday comes and goes by, and he shows up on Thursday, comes in, and does nothing, because the Dominican guy does all the work anyways, and he takes a picture of the room. Then he leaves and the next thing I know the landlord says all the work has been done and we have to pay the increase. Well, hello. He's done one room, not the three that needs to be done, but tells the landlord the work is finished. This is what I call deceitful and two-faced. He's just a two-faced liar.

At any rate, this deception by the super is akin to Goffman's presentation of self and Arlie Hochschild's work in *The Managed Heart* (1983). Comparable examples are the police detective in the interrogation room or the parking violations officer in the street who put on a face of meanness to intimidate people,

utilizing emotional labor. The super puts on a face to appease people in order to get them to, first, let him into their apartments and, second, convince them to do what the landlord wants.

The former tenant who recommended Sharif spoke of him in glowing terms regarding his attire but said he is like all the supers she has dealt with here in New York:

> The super sent these workers to my door and says there was a sincere desire on the part of the landlord to change the old bathroom toilet for a new one because the old ones used too much water. Okay. Makes sense. I let him come in and the next time I find out from the tenant's association that those old toilets were being sold on the black market for lots of money and that my new one was much smaller, cheaper, and very uncomfortable to sit on, and as far as saving water . . . Well, these new water saving toilets didn't save any more water than the old ones.

While it was not Sharif who made such promises, he was responsible, and the tenant felt he instructed those workers to come to her place with the water-saving story. She believed it was Sharif who sold the old toilets or at least got a percentage of the deals with landlord complicity.

Allan: Telling Stories by Hands

Now the focus shifts to Allan, a thirty-something super at Madison Avenue Apartment Corporation in East Harlem. He has been a super in his building for several years now, he is married with three kids, and he lives in the complex.

> I spent the first four years of my life in Romania. My father was a political representative back home, and he and my whole family was exiled to the United States. They [his parents] took the citizenship way back in 1989. My grandparents came here in 1978, and eight years later my father came over and left my mother and me there until 1994, when my father sponsored me to come over. I actually grew up in Queens. I started learning the trade because my mother's brother, he owns a plumbing company back home, and during my junior year, he would take me and my brother with him to do different things to help him out. And I ended up going to the plumbing school in Romania and getting my plumbing license in Romania and ended up learning a little bit about carpentry, a little bit electric, and the dry walling. My father was also a maintenance guy, and he worked in Brooklyn at the Main Jewish Center there. My father was a maintenance guy there for like 12 years. He said if something needs fixing, you have to either fix it with your hands or with your brains. And I love what I'm doing. And if I had to do it over again, I would do the same thing. And I'm very happy with my job.

Some argue the super is the most important nonuniformed worker in the city, though others like anthropologist Robin Nagle, author of *Picking Up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City*, says the sanitation worker (or "san man" as he is called in the trade) is the most important, because whether there is a flood (Hurricane Sandy), a terrorist attack (9/11), a blackout (like in 1965), or any catastrophe, the garbage is still expected to be picked up.[10]

Either way, the use of the hands in the handyman professions is disappearing. The super does something that is becoming outmoded since the advent of the information age, which prides itself on mental work: he performs manual labor. "As if working with your hands doesn't mean you don't work with your mind," Allan opined. But today, working with your hands doing the kind of work supers do is increasingly seen as belonging to a bygone time. Allan continued: "Working with your hands is what I do, and yes, they are a bit rough; I have calluses, they're cut up, and I've had this finger almost broken one time. Look at them. But in America today, working with your hands is becoming more and more a thing of the past."

This is apparent from the changes taking place in the Department of Housing. Ralph Glans is a retired inspector at the Department of Housing in the city, and he recalls when various changes started to happen:

> When I first started working at the department, everything was done by hand, but it was manual labor that people loved. Not that they don't love what they do now, but it has changed. In the 1980s, the city developed this geo-coded file system where every structure in the city, commercial, industrial, and residential, had to have a file number and this file number was directly connected to what was called "decentralized database," so since you are interested in real estate, they had

> information on real estate taxes and the payments information in this new system, so that if you owned a building, let's say, and owed taxes on that building, we would know about it. As far as my job was concerned, if you had a violation in your building of any kind, I mean any violation, including a fire violation, we would know about it right away, and we would know right away based on the existing records or we could double-check with other agencies. We couldn't do this before without mucho hassles, ripping and running, calling and checking. It was a big hassle. But as far as my job is concerned, or was concerned, this meant we didn't have to send two or three inspectors to the same building to check on the same violations.

This is what technology does; it eliminates people and eliminates manual tasks—one aspect of the job. New information technology, the loss of manufacturing, and an increased number of back-office jobs with computers have become the future for the workplace. As for Allan, he discussed his work schedule and showed me the service order form he provides his tenants to fill out when they want work to be done. His service order involves multiple duties and looks like this:

Service Order

To: _____

Date _____ 20____

Name _____

Unit# _____

Phone#: Daytime _____ Evening _____

Permission to enter unit: Yes: _____ No: _____

Service Requested _____

_____

_____

The above work has been done to my satisfaction

_____

Date Signature Print

Completed by Print

Allan mentioned that as far as his schedule goes, he can do everything that people request on the worksheet. He mentioned how his job skills are top notch: "I basically can do everything. Whatever I'm not able to do, I know how to do it but I'm not allowed to because of rules of the co-op. I just do basically, I just do like basic stuff that people needs me to do, like change a toilet, fix an outlet, change a sink, change a faucet, fix a faucet; all the basic things that need to get done in an apartment, I can do them all. I'm up to date."

Union versus nonunion is one bone of contention for supers; some supers are in while others are out. Allan explained it this way:

> To be honest, I've never worked in unions and I don't really know what's going on. My father used to be in the union, and he used to tell me they . . . treat you bad. I think it's the same thing in nonunion jobs. I don't know what's the difference, because I can't make the comparison because I didn't work in the union, but they, I basically have the same benefits. You don't need someone to protect your job. I think you should be the only one protecting your own job. Be sure that you're doing things that people want, and they don't say, "Ooh, I, uhh, we don't want that guy to work for us because he's rude," or what have you. But the union I don't know. The benefits are the same here. We run by the union rules, but we don't really have a union building, I mean.

I wanted him to tell me more about the union building and what it meant to him.

> A union building is like from 86th, where they have these fancy buildings there. Well everybody is union there. Everybody is union there. But maybe they [union workers] get one more week of vacation holiday than I do or a coupla vacation days than I do, and of course they get a little bit more money than I do. But I don't care that much about the money. Like I said, I'm happy with my job, and that's more important to me right now. I just like to put myself in the service of people. Now I'm not saying that if I find a better job, I wouldn't go, but this is good for me, since I took over this building when I was like 24 years old. I was the youngest super in the company at that point. They gave me a three-months trial to see if I'm actually going to be able to handle the building. The management was really satisfied. They says that I was the youngest superintendent but they know I can take care of the building. Well, I already came with some skills, but others I learned while I was working with some of the contractors that were hired by the management company, and I was always next to them asking them questions about this or that. How does this work, how do you do that? You know. How come it's not possible to do this thing? Things like that, you know, in the building I was always learning by asking questions about how things work.

Athena provided the most definitive response to the issue of unions and union buildings:

> I should explain to you, the way it works about the union is this: You, the individual, the super is not in the union so much as the building. By that I mean, if the building is a unionized building, the staff joins the union. And if it's not a union building, the staff does not join the union. That's how it works. And the one thing I must say that is magnificent about the union is their educational benefits. And one of the things that tells me as a super when I have a staff, I mean, is one of the first things I ask the guys (and its always been men in my staff) is this: How many classes have you taken? Which classes have you taken? The guy that tells me none, that tells me, well, that speaks volumes to me. "Ah, well, I been a super for 17 years and I never took one of their courses." Wow. That's mind-boggling to me. The most expensive pieces of that benefits package, besides health insurance I mean, for the landlords to pay for, the owners to pay for, is that educational component. It's that Thomas Shortman School. And it's a fantastic school. You can get all the certifications for free. You can learn English, or writing—you can learn math. You can learn management, too.

While Athena is adamant about supers taking advantage of educational benefits, I learned from speaking with other union representatives that the biggest difference between union and nonunion buildings is the cost of labor. If you are talking about the average condominium or cooperative owner, the biggest difference is the dollar figure for staff wages and benefits, and in the case of most buildings, how much each tenant pays in maintenance fees every month should also be taken into account. You can imagine a nonunion building having less of these costs when Allan and other nonunion supers get one less extra week of vacation, but he downplays what actually is the case. Union workers get a comprehensive benefits package and a 401K plan that every employer buys into and contributes to, and that is included in the labor contract with the union. And though Allan says he doesn't care about the money, and I understand this sentiment, it is perhaps a bit disingenuous. He may indeed feel happy with his job, and not care about the salary, but I wonder then why he would so readily admit that he would take another job if offered. Craig, if you recall, was perhaps more honest when he stated that money does matter whether you love your job or not. His sentiment is that the job has to love you back, and the best way to show that love is more pay. But I may be wrong about this, and so I asked another question about whether Allan felt he could be replaced if tenants didn't like him.

> To be honest, every single building I've worked in, you gonna have 5 percent of the people are not gonna like you. You always have that thing. Unless you a

guy that's cursing out those old ladies. They say, "Well, his skills are great but he's cursing too much." They cannot actually fire you as long as you follow the book—if you follow the building requirements. Of course, the building is run by the management company, and you have a board of directors. So in order for you be fired, you have to piss off the board of directors, and then they're gonna have to take action on you. But they do have to give you warnings, which I've never got any. So far I'm good. But it's not so easy a thing to fire someone, cause, I mean, basically they trust you because you're like the resident manager of the building. So whatever happens to the building, it goes through the super. And the super is in contact with the board of directors and management, and as long as I keep the straight and narrow path and not go left or right, I'm good. And let the people know this is what happens, this thing was done yesterday, this was supposed to be done yesterday and was never done. You know what I mean? We have to let them know something and that you are on top of things, and if you do that, they don't have any reason to says something to you. I have my notebook, my daily log book, and whatever needs to be completed, I put it down in that. I also put down whatever needed to be done but can't do, well, I put that down, too, in there. Let's say moneywise I can't do this job or that or I have proposals or contractors I want to contact, things like that, well, I put all that down in that log book. Most likely I'm on top of all these things, though. The management don't even need to come to the building.

We sit in Allan's basement office, a neat space with fish tanks on two sides of his desk belonging to his daughter. A few tools hang on the front side opposite a refrigerator and some chairs. He sits back with his hands in front of him, sleeves rolled up, and rocks back and forth in the brown leather chair when he wishes to make a point. I ask about people skills.

> As a super, you should have some skills with people, too, because if you a sad guy, or like an angry guy, I don't think your relationship is gonna work out. You know, I think you're in the wrong place or in the wrong position. Because as a super, you are in contact with a lot of different people—tenants, contractors, people that come and go and like that—and I'm trying to be as friendly as I can as far as people are friendly with me. But I don't like to judge people, but what is happening is that if things are not working out in your life, it's not because of me. Well, I'm waiting for the contractor to fix it. "Well, you should do it faster."

Allan says the quickness of the job depends on his tiredness at the end of the day. He feels some tenants cannot be pleased no matter what the super does. He insists that those who cannot be pleased are the 5 percent he spoke about earlier. He feels that group of impossible-to-please tenants will always be around—unhappy, inveterate complainers.

> You will always have that 5 percent that are not happy, and you always have that percentage of people that if you do a thousand things right for them and then do one thing wrong, that's it for them. They never forget that one thing you did wrong, and they forget about all the thousands of things you did over the years right. But you also gonna have people who appreciate your work, and that makes you feel good. They are people who just don't bother you at all and many who will actually say to me, "If there is anything I can do for you, let me know." But this building has helped me out a lot, too.

When I ask what he means, he explains, "Listen, my wife was in Romania, and we got married five years ago—no, I'm sorry, seven years ago—and she, or we had a lot of problems bringing her over here. With me being a citizen and all. And the management company, they helped me out a lot. They got me immigration lawyers, and they didn't charge me for all of this."

I ask about the effect his job has on his family.

> For the most part, no, it doesn't [affect my family], because I'm the type of person who don't take work home with me, and I try not to let work come home to me that much, but there are times when I'll get a call at two o'clock in the morning, a pipe burst or something like that, and she's a little pissed at that, but basically I keep the work at work, but these are emergency things that can't be helped. I

tell her that and she understands, and says as long as "you like what you're doing and it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother me." Occasionally we will go out and I get a call and I have to come back to the building, and she get upset for like five minutes, and then she realizes that's my job and cools down. And she respects what I do as much as I respect what she does.

He leans back in the chair and glances at the fish tank, and I ask him to walk me through what a typical day is like on the job.

My basic work day work is I start at 8:00 in the morning, and I spend one hour or two in the lobby, because that's the time when people go to work. And that's also the time they can tell you if they have any problems. I would rather they tell me then. "Hey Allan, my seat doesn't work" or "I think I have problems with one of my power outlets." You know, like that. But then some people started complaining at the beginning that the super spends like two hours in the lobby in the morning, so I stopped doing that. Then they started to complain to management that they don't see the super anymore: he's not down in the lobby to take our complaints. So I said, hey, you can't win, which is it? So the board said that I should start with a schedule, and so they said just stay in the lobby to see what the people have to say and what their problems are.

In addition to his regular duties, Allan now has another thing to do that involves security company contractors. "I have to make sure they are sharp, come to work on time, and that sorta thing. I just tell them, listen, I don't wanna be the bad guy. If you want me to be the bad guy, I will, but basically if

they do their job right, no problems from me, you see. But if you screw up one time, I'm gonna have to go to management."

In addition to this aspect of his job, he has the work service orders.

> What it is, it's an individual sheet that people fill out any problems they have in their apartments, and I just collect those and see what they have that I need to do or management needs to do. After that, I check the building and my different rooms: the pump room, the fire check room, the meters, the electrical ones. I check the elevator room to make sure it's not too hot so the computer don't go too crazy. I go and check my emails to find out what's going on with contractors and such. I will check on them [contractors], and if I ask them to come in because of a problem, they may not come, but I tell them if management tells them to come, they better get over here right away.

The use of technology changes the way supers do their work. For example, calls on a cell phone cannot be as easily dismissed as a call to a landline or a knock on the door. Also, computers and email make it more difficult for some supers to avoid work they are requested to do. But Allan deals with tenants who need help of one kind or another, and he tells me how emergencies are part of the job: "My tenants are mostly cops, city workers like that, because Bloomberg [former mayor of New York City] knew the developer and wanted him to allow city employees to get these condos/co-ops, and as a result, we got a lot of cops, firemen, other uniform city workers in here." Mayor Bloomberg started various initiatives around 2000 at the same time that housing values started to rise and condominium, cooperative, and apartment development took off in Harlem and uptown more generally. The fact that Bloomberg knew the developer was an added plus. One Bloomberg housing initiative was the Harlem RBI Interagency Development New Housing Marketplace Plan (NHMP), which established an initial 165,000 units of affordable housing for 500,000 New Yorkers by the end of 2014. This initiative is a multibillion-dollar project if you include the additional commitment leverage plan. It is estimated that for every dollar the city invests, the plan has leveraged $3.42 in additional funding, which comes to $21 billion total. East Harlem Community Board 11 was slated for 8,678 of those proposed housing units.

Allan continues:

> The cops, some of whom have to deal with a stressful occupation, and this area used to have a lot of drug dealing but now is pretty safe. But the stress of these kinda jobs makes the situation at home, if things are not going right, stressful, too. Let me tell you a story about a guy, I won't say whether he's a cop or a fireman or whatnot, but he called me one day, frantic, saying that he wanted a new stove, his stove doesn't work, it's a shame and a disgrace in this modern new building . . .

> this blank, blank things don't work. Okay, he's going on and on. He's swearing and says he's gonna call this one, call that one, blah, blah. Well, I go up there and check the stove, and I look at it and I say to him, "You know, in order for the stove to work, you gotta plug it in so it will get gas, and the gas will light up the burner and the burner will cook the food." I said it just like that, and he had to just start laughing, because this was his emergency when in fact it was not, but to him it was. All he had to do was plug the thing in. So we supers are in the business of putting out the fires, so to speak, when tenants call.

Sharif thought at first that it was "cool" to have tenants be able to put their emergency requests in by email, but that was before everybody had a phone and a computer. "There was a time when I could easily avoid doing some things or having to deal with some people who were, excuse my French, a pain in the ass. But now with email and cell phones, I have to deal with them no matter what." Allan mentioned police officers, firemen, even drug dealers, and if I were a student of the comparative school, I would take note of their work and compare it to other professions and look for similarities. Similarities do exist between these groups in the sense that one person's routine of work is made up of the emergencies of other people. Sociologist E. C. Hughes argues, "This is not to suggest any degree of similarity greater than chance expectations between the members of these pairs, but simply to indicate that the student starts with the assumption that all kinds of work belong in the same series, regardless of their place in prestige or ethical ratings."[11] Take, for instance, Allan's reference to supers on the one hand and drug dealers on the other. By drug dealers, I mean both the common illegal street variety as well as the legal pharmaceutical industry dealers we see and hear every night on our television set. If we compare these professions and add sex workers and psychologists to supers, they all, you might say, do work for the benefit of people in distress. They all must take care not to become too personally involved with clients who come to them with some kind of problem, both intimate and otherwise. That means you must find a common theme in human work and/or locate a common theme in the jobs that people do. One such theme that emerges from these groups is routine and emergency.

A super who wished to be anonymous told me that he saw his role not unlike that of the doctor or the drug dealer, because much of what they do is in an emergency situation saving a person from a kind of distress.

> A drug dealer once said to me, he said, "I'm like a doctor to the patient who's sick. I supply this woman with her drugs, otherwise she's dis-eased. She stressful, she can't get along with her husband or her kids, she can't enjoy sex, she a mess—and then I'm called in the middle of the night and boom, she all better." Well, the super is the same way in the sense; he comes when an emergency happens and fix

the pipes or the lights when a fuse blows, or whatever and boom, things are all better. The doctor, the dentist, the same thing. They are all emergency workers trying to save people from some anxiety.

Family Life: Kelly and Other Supers

No discussion of the life of the super would be complete without including a super who breaks the mold in other ways. Around the area south of here is Kelly's neighborhood. 104th Street is a mix of old and new, with signs of gentrification on the one hand—new bars and restaurants popping up here and there—and microentrepreneurs on the other, like the Guatemalan flower sellers, or the Mexican husband and wife ice cream team, or the rain man, who shows up every time it rains selling umbrellas and plastic hats, or the knife sharpener, who wheels his hand truck around the block pitching his wares. The jewel in the crown on these streets is Kim's green grocery and vegetable stand on Amsterdam Avenue, which caters to not only the locals but passersby, as cars stop and passengers jump in and out buying foodstuffs. This car traffic runs up the avenue and provides a kind of auto-zone of buyers, and there is also the American youth hostel on the opposite side of the street, from which European young people cross over to buy fruit, vegetables, and water before taking off on a tour of the city. This is a bustling neighborhood and prime real estate for property entrepreneurs to pounce on. This area, now being called by new comers "South Harlem," is one of the first signs of gentrification.

The naming or renaming of an area is an old trick by gentrifiers, as the branding or rebranding of a community is part of the reselling of the area for newcomers to identify as their own. Harlem as a village is being renamed in various locations, and that amounts to it being replaced. The brand is changing. The Ethiopian eatery called Awash, which is popular with the Columbia College crowd, is in a new 100-story monstrosity of a building at the lower end at 100th Street and Amsterdam, between St. Michaels Church and Trinity Lutheran Church, and the 31-story Ariel West and 37-story Ariel East buildings, the Whole Foods store on Columbus, and a gaggle of new apartment and condo complexes only middle- and upper-class White folk are moving into epitomize the changes in the neighborhood. I remember when this community was 99 percent Puerto Ricans and poor Blacks, with bodegas everywhere. But now, all the shops are gourmet named, and even the old Oppenheimers butcher shop on Broadway is gone. A local church has an "adopt a bodega" movement, but wherever that happens, you know it's already too late. The churches are about the only institutions that remain the same over the years, and if it wasn't for their tax-exempt status, they would be gone, too. It's certainly not religion that keeps them in the neighborhood.

Some people complain about the changes, others shrug their shoulders, and some are angry at the transformation taking place right under their stoops, while others are downright mad about the whole thing. The angriest are the old-timers who have seen this all before and remember the times when urban renewal meant "Black and Latino removal," as they were usually the poorest people in the community. High-rise housing projects replaced their neighborhood shops, the bodegas and mom-and-pop stores never to be seen again. This is what makes those who are mad all the madder, because they know this is history repeating. And while a few protest with picket signs and petitions, organize rent strikes, and write letters to the state officials, others protest by silent gestures of disgust when they see the new gentrifiers pregnant with the privilege they carry with them, along with their $300 jogging outfits, $200 matching running shoes, and $1,000 baby carriages, heading for the idyll of Central Park. Yet times are a-changing, and a rare few actually take over buildings and organize collectives. One person changing with the times, and who has seen much of those neighborhood alterations, is actually a small building owner and superintendent in the middle of this transformation. This is the woman super of 104th Street, and while there are probably many women owners of buildings, there are few women who are supers.

In the winter as the wind swirls around the West End Presbyterian Church steeple, I see the edge of 105th Street and hear the happy screams of children sliding in the snowy playground behind Grosvenor Neighborhood House. Other places popping up around the blocks in the neighborhood are Dani Cleaners, The Organic Cleaners, Maria's Pizza, Champion Bicycle Rentals, New Kim Chinese food, Frederick Douglass housing projects, Metro 11 Hair Studio, Blockheads Burritos, DRD jewelry, Amsterdam Tavern, an empty space for rent, and Drame T-shirt spot. A woman turns the corner and the eye notices a man, a bicycle, and a child crying. He yells at the woman and the little girl holds tightly to her mother's hand. The wind pushes the man's trousers and the skirt of the woman back toward the little girl, and the bicycle falls to the ground.

The women supers in this book, Kelly and Athena, are unusual in a profession more dominated by men than most others, yet they hold their own. I heard of only one other woman super during the study period, who works for the Abyssinian Baptist Church, but I did not have the chance to talk with her. Kelly offers a unique glance at how she goes about the business of being super in the South Harlem community. She hailed from Indiana before coming to New York City by way of Michigan in the 1980s, and she began her college education at East Tennessee State University in 1973, then transferred the following year to Arizona State and, after a year or so off, ended up at University of Virginia, where she graduated. After leaving college, she came to New York City.

"Just kind of on a whim," she says. "You know, I always wanted to try New York City. So when I got here, I did temp jobs, and subletted apartments. And so my first couple of years, I had a few different jobs and a few different apartments."

After settling in the city, though she wouldn't call it settling, she moved around a bit. "My very first apartment was in SoHo, an amazing location for my first apartment. Then I went to 14th and Third, and then I moved to west 70th Street, and then from there, up to, like 180th Street. So yeah, literally in my first year in New York, I think I was in those four locations. And that was around 1981 when I came up here [between 104th and 105th and Amsterdam]: And then, yeah, so it was January of '81. Wow, is that possible? . . . So I actually had those first four apartments within six months, less than a year."

In January 1981, she met a man who would later become one of her partners in ownership of the building. "I mentioned that I and my boyfriend were looking for an apartment, and he mentioned that he was involved in the building, and that is the building that we now are co-owners of. So I just . . . my boyfriend and I came and looked at the building early, early '81, and took two apartments and combined them, so the building at that time."

She then said the building was under the 7A program with an administrator. "With a 7A administrator, that means that the landlord skipped out of the building and owed back taxes, so the city was managing the property, until the building would have gone into the foreclosure process of becoming available for public auction . . . our expectation was that the tenants were going to buy the building from the city, but what ended up happening is that a local landlord of several properties found the guy that owned our building. He was in Florida, so the local landlord [whose name] is Murray Chase found him, bought the building out from under us."

The hustle and bustle of the street creates a feeling of a bazaar, as peddlers, kids on bikes, women with expensive baby carriages, food vendors, gypsy cabs, and joggers zip by on a windy but sunny day. Kelly continues with her story: "We felt so hurt and betrayed really at this situation and a little mad, too . . . here we were, we had a landowner who took this building right from under us. But we weren't done yet, and we basically pressured him to make a deal because the building was very, very run down." Kelly tells how the building was in bad shape, with bad plumbing, pipes leaking, and "water flowing down the stairs," which froze, and when they actually took over the building, her apartment was particularly bad. "When we took my apartment on the third floor, you actually could see through the bathroom floor down to the ground," she says, sounding exhausted just in the telling. "This is the condition of the building. I mean, you really needed to make tremendous repairs, and he then was willing to sell it to us."

It was at that point she and others decided to form a corporation, a subchapter (S) corporation. This is a corporation that does not have employees or a benefits package, and no salaries are paid; people are hired only as consultants. She explains, "There were only 5 of us involved, but as a tenant organization there were 10, maybe 11 or so, when we thought we were going to purchase the [building] from the city, but only 5 of us chose to form this corporation to actually buy the building. But keep in mind, we don't actually own our apartment; that would be like a condo. We are not a co-op; we are a small company that owns the building."

Kelly, sitting near the edge of her chair and carrying books and food, decided to talk about her role as office holder for the company. She explains how the corporation has five key members and that two other members of the group had been bought out. This information is revealing, because I realize that she is not just a super but an owner/manager/super all in one. "After those were bought out, we had only three holders, but only two of which have lived in the building all these years. The third minority shareholder, we don't have much communication with. The two of us who have lived in the building the whole time, we manage it."

The Bar

The bars, nightclubs, and restaurants can and do change the character of the community by bringing in people from different areas and perhaps with different values. Bars and neighborhoods disappear, particularly dive bars like the Seville and Paris Blues, both located in a five-block radius in Central Harlem. While the Seville, a known hustlers' tavern, has been demolished, the Paris Blues ironically is still open. One patron said, "I've been coming here for years, and I heard from Bobby [the owner] that it will be closing next year to make way for a housing complex." The Seville on 126th and Seventh where Frenchy[12] and I used to hang out, back in the day, is like so many bars I can name that were once pimp bars, hustlers' joints, working men's joints, all gone now. The dive bar or the so-called bucket-of-blood bar is becoming extinct in these neighborhoods, some argue because of changing neighborhood clientele. The question is, who benefits economically from these changes and who suffers culturally? These places generated social capital and unified the community, since they were cheap and within walking distance of home. But the "new Harlem" is about class and money, there is always fear, too, of corporate standardization of night life, because historically what made New York so unique was its constellation of places and shops and people—that mélange of styles and nuance. Kelly speaks about the South Harlem bar scene and the neighborhood impact: "The big bar, it was, oh it was something else, it was called, it was some kind

of SoHa, South of Harlem. I forget what the name of that place was, but it was a lounge, and I never felt that that really took off. It worked, it was there for maybe ten years, but Village Pour House has, you know, succeeded. But also notable are . . . Blockheads. I guess Thai Market came in maybe five years ago already. And that was our first sidewalk café. We love Thai Market, and they've been extremely successful."

For Kelly, this was a good business, a welcome version of gentrification. But a year or so later, another restaurant came on the block. "Then came Blockheads Burritos, which is a question mark. They are right downstairs from us, 959, and it is too noisy, and too much crowd on the sidewalk on the weekends. We are, however, working closely with the owner of Blockheads, and they have installed, this year, a bouncer guy who does seem to be managing the noise."

As summer rolled around, Kelly began to see the neighborhood change.

> Friday and Saturday night, when they do stay open a little later, they can't contain it, and because it is untenable the way it is, the noise is ridiculous . . . they try to manage it, but it's so popular that there's always a crowd on the sidewalk, from Thursday through Sunday. But there were times lately when I felt like, "Uh oh, this is not my neighborhood anymore." And now, what used to be an Irish pub is now, what's it called? Something 106, the one next to the corner on this side.
>
> It was the Night Café for many years. That was started by a couple young people, and it had a billiard table and it was just a cool bar. It was gentrification, but kind of in a low-key way, so while it was young people owning a cool bar, it didn't feel like it was changing the nature of the neighborhood. Whereas Thai market really for me signaled, in my immediate two blocks, which by extension is 110th, Thai Market was a turning point because of the sidewalk café. Bistro 1018 has a sidewalk, but that's almost not our neighborhood anyway, that's starting to be Columbia. So that night café was a very nice business for all those years, and they were priced out. And this, whatever it is 106, which is a total yuppie, upscale, expensive bar.
>
> But that's what I am not happy seeing when gentrification comes. And that's a good . . . I think you can really talk in those terms. Night Café was a friendly, successful, reasonable business. That 106, or whatever it is, bar is drawing from, you know, people that don't live in the neighborhood—which is a good thing, it's good to draw people from other neighborhoods to your neighborhood, that's what builds, you know, the economy of a neighborhood—but it's a real trade-off, and that's . . . gentrification is a real trade-off.

Kelly points out how the neighborhood is changing right down to her block, which she hardly recognizes anymore.

> And so now, now, I don't recognize my block. Fortunately, the people who took the funeral parlor are barbers; they were in a tiny shop for all those years. They now have this huge, and always busy, Latino barber shop. We also have, luckily, the owners of the liquor store next door, which has just doubled in size. So I feel really good about that. Those are local people who've lived in the neighborhood forever and own two big businesses on my block. We still have the one bodega, let's hope they can survive. I'm talking about the one next to the pizza place. I don't know who owns that one, but they are run by Arabs. They're very nice delis, and I patronize them but I often will make a point of patronizing my bodega when I can go either way. It's the one on the corner of 107th. They've been there forever, they actually were priced out, they moved . . . it has always been a bodega, but they took it over from where Thai Market is now, that gave up that space for a smaller space, so that's an example of "Uh oh." The bodega had to move to a smaller space.

Fortunately, there is another bodega right around the corner on 106th and another on the west corner of 106th and Amsterdam.

> So the bodegas are still, you know, they're going to hang tight as long as people can still afford many of the rents in our immediate neighborhood because of rent stabilization. But, you know, there are the landlords who are turning over and pricing out people who've lived in the neighborhood forever . . . it's right now. You've come to me at the right moment, because as a thirty-year resident and owner, I see no change, a little change, more change, and now, boom. It's really right now, and now we're getting, on the corner, the northwest corner, of 106th and Amsterdam is gonna be a big, fancy, kind of café-bar, but a nice one, I hope. And again, welcome, but another thing is services versus just one more restaurant, one more bar. Communities need more than just restaurants and bars. And you know, there used to be a produce shop. When we first moved to the neighborhood, there was an Italian produce store right across the street from us. So you know, we still have a produce store at 104th and Amsterdam, a produce shop, but then you come . . . we have no grocery stores, you know, there's a Gristedes at 104th and Broadway. There's that Associated, or whatever it's becoming, at 97th and Amsterdam. But . . . you know, we need the bodegas, and I get groceries now instead of Associated at Garden of Eden, which is a beautiful store on Broadway and 107th . . . when that became an upscale, lovely, but not-for-normal shopping, I started patronizing the bodegas more, and now I'm making a point of patronizing the bodegas as much as possible, because I feel they're essential, they're healthy neighborhood services, not just restaurants and bars.

The changes that have affected her most are the lower crime rates in the neighborhood. She speaks on that issue:

I think, you know, it's really the whole New York City changed so much, especially in the '90s. You know, crime was down and the economy was up, so everywhere on the Upper West Side started to feel safer and cleaner, and that's a good thing. In my immediate neighborhood, drug traffic plummeted, kind of. I'm going to say more in this decade, the first decade of the twenty-first century, we started to not even feel that there was dealing anymore in the neighborhood, and I think that's just the city in general, crime down, the economy good, so that was the thing.

I should say, too, that of course started to change in the '90s and then completely changed coming into this century. It's nice having nice restaurants in my immediate, you know, on Amsterdam, in my neighborhood, so feeling like I can patronize my immediate neighborhood is cool. But so now, you know, then there's that balance of, is it just going to become another party strip, which Amsterdam is like in the 80s . . . developed into such a way that is just bar, bar, bar, restaurant, bar, restaurant? I wouldn't wanna see that happen to my three or four blocks of Amsterdam Avenue, because it just doesn't feel as congenial, it doesn't feel as neighborhoody. It doesn't feel as, you know, comfortable residential when you're just a bunch of bars and restaurants. And, you know, you walk out of your door at night and it's loud and noisy out there, just people who don't live in the neighborhood, which is great, but not too great, not completely great. You don't want your residential neighborhood to be completely that way.

I ask how she would compare her building to the other buildings in and around the area, both now and when she first moved in.

Other buildings in our block, notably the abandoned buildings 951 and 953, and there were two or three abandoned buildings right around the corner on Amsterdam, so in our block, all of those got renovated. So 951 and 953, you know, reduce the number of apartments per floor, they made four apartments per floor, so they are gonna be smaller and way more expensive because they got renovated, so a lot of young professional people maybe moved in there, students that could afford it, whereas our building we renovated very slowly over time . . . we only brought a new boiler finally in around the year 2000. And we gradually did all the windows. First we did electricity and plumbing and basically all that needed to be done.

But of course, many of the buildings in our immediate neighborhood have been maintained well all along and have had stabilized tenants in them all along: basically, most of us have lived here for at least twenty years, and some of us thirty. And so many people on Amsterdam have been here for their whole life.

Another aspect of change in the South Harlem neighborhood is certain types of extralegal activities:

> Oh, I would say from early 1980s to now, plenty of drug-dealing through the 1980s, into the 1990s. You know, honestly we would hear gun fire and some people did not feel safe, but I never felt unsafe in the neighborhood. I always worked on the theory that the dealers didn't want trouble, and that's the main thing [laughs] . . . We also would watch through the Columbus-Amsterdam BID [statistics that were put out by the Business Improvement District], so this is late '90s, early 2000s. My partner is very closely involved with the precinct, and so he would watch the cop stats, it's the crime data base, and you know, we'd always watch that because there was always more crime than you want in the neighborhood. But I think it's certainly better now than it was twenty years ago.

But the demographics of the neighborhood have changed as well. In response to a question about these changes, especially regarding race, Kelly has this to say:

> As far as the demographics of the neighborhood, our blocks (I mean basically Amsterdam everywhere below, from 110th to the 80s) is very Latino and today is still very Latino . . . and Black but you know, I'm gonna just ballpark it . . . Maybe let's say when I moved in, almost thirty years ago, it would have been, just for kicks, let me say 40 percent . . . this may be crazy and not accurate, but let's say something like 40 percent African American, 50 percent Latino, and 10 percent White, let's say something crazy like that. And then I'm going to say now—let's just talk from, you know, let's disregard Frederick Douglass projects and just think of the residential buildings above, say, 103rd—now I'm gonna just wildly guess that it might be something more like maybe 20 to 25, maybe 30 percent White, 30 African American, 40 or 50 Latino. [laughs] Wild anecdotal guess . . . it feels like a big change, and it may even be more White than that because it still surprises me how much White pedestrian traffic I see.

I should mention how part of that traffic has to do with the social red-light district in the Black and Latino community, those designated places where open drug markets and other kinds of pedestrian vice exist for many White patrons. The question of nighttime as it relates to social experience and interaction is significant as far as the neighborhood is concerned, but the larger question to consider is of how gentrification alters social habits and expectations of leisure and work for longstanding local residents.

Sociologist Elijah Anderson wrote in his book *A Place on the Corner* about Jelly's Place, calling it a "home territory bar," a designation coined by sociologist Sherri Cavan in her treatise *Liquor License*.[13] The home territory bar in this neighborhood is losing ground as these communities undergo change. As Sociologists Logan and Molotch write, this is "spot development or another way of saying, gentrification, because white migrants move in and here integration

can be a method of bringing the advantages of white presence to a previously abandoned area. Regardless of the context, whites become the prize and thus the group whose needs come first."[14] When I talked to Anderson, he said Blacks are either replaced when Whites are coming in or actively discouraged and displaced when Whites are moving out. In other words, a kind of honor extends to Whites, and dishonor or stigma is attached to the poor, be they Latino, Black, or other. Though the home territory dive bar is almost extinct and has a disreputable reputation for some, it provided or performed a vital, though nearly imperceptible role within the transition community. It was a home away from home for many poor and even middle-class residents. Urban taverns and bars serve as important gathering places for people who are longtime residents of the urban village. As a man on 116th Street said, "If you clean up the funky parts, you clean up the funk. If you clean up the funk, you clean up the folk who make the funk possible. That's gentrification baby."

"The neighborhood was extremely different just a few years back than it is now," Kelly explains.

> Just to give you an idea how different, there were abandoned buildings all around us. The great story is that the buildings just north of us, 951 and 953, was abandoned. And when there was a burglary in our building, we actually chased the burglars into the abandoned building next door, and at a later date . . . maybe this is two different stories but . . . we actually found stolen goods of ours in that abandoned building next door. There were also abandoned buildings on 106th Street around the corner from our building. Crack vials everywhere, that was very much the early '80s still. Gun shots, we would hear gun shots on a regular basis. And then 107th Street was an entire haven for drug dealing. There was a lot of dealing right in front of our building and was a part of our lives in the early '80s.

Kelly tells about the kind of shops that used to be in the area with a bit of nostalgia in her voice:

> Yeah, there were, of course, plenty of bodegas, which is still true, many are left, but I'm nervously watching to see how much longer that will be true. Let's see, the whole time I've lived here until this past year, there was the funeral parlor, a large funeral parlor just across the street. Barber shops, beauty salons, there were—ah, this is a thing of the past, or something that I'm not seeing much anymore—there used to be a lot of what were called multiservice storefronts, where they would do things like change money or ship money and goods abroad, you know, to Latin America basically. They could cash your check, they could help you with insurance, car insurance . . . I can't remember what other kinds of things they did, but that was a common business on Amsterdam in those years. Yeah.

She sighs as she looks at the proud photos of her son and says wistfully that the boy grew up in this neighborhood and sees the community as home. I ask about what was it like taking her child to school in the neighborhood before things began to change and how he felt growing up here.

> Well, you know, I will report that my son, when he was very little, into elementary school or I should say, pretty much through elementary school, he stated that he did not like our neighborhood at some point as a small child. It was just acceptable, the neighborhood as normal, but I'm going to say mid-elementary school, probably even into middle school, he started to feel uncomfortable with the, you know, nature of our neighborhood. It was starting to improve for sure by the mid-'90s, but he still, you know, he would complain about the loud Latin music in the summertime and just the feeling of discomfort with certain street activity, and as a biracial young man, he always, in those years, felt uncomfortable being interpreted as Latino, which he is not, or feeling a little uncomfortable with this street life that would approach him as a young Black man.

From the age of 8 or 9 to the age of 11 or 12, the super woman said, her son was not real comfortable in the neighborhood. "But all of that changed by mid-teenagehood, and now he loves our neighborhood, loves the upper west side, loves being an urban guy. You know, he feels that this is his element. So it was just when he was a kid that he had a period of not feeling comfortable in our neighborhood. And it was precisely our chunk of Amsterdam Avenue that he was uncertain about."

One of the main issues when neighborhoods begin this gentrification phase is the cost of living increase; prices for food, services, and rent start low but slowly move upward for the poor residents. It's as if everyone benefits but the poor; the rich get their new spaces for a steal, and the middle class benefits from increased security, new amenities, police protection, and the like. The poor get some of these amenities, for a short time, but overall these more positive community changes only benefit the poor temporarily. Kelly confirms the change in rents: "Gosh, I'll tell you that the rents were breathtakingly low by today's standards. I think all of the apartments in the building, and they're technically all one-bedrooms, but they were in the order of two-something to three-something. So, um, like other living expenses . . . it's hard to think."

She begins talking about how many friends she had living in the neighborhood.

> I'm going to say basically none, other than the people in my building. We were kind of the young White kids in our building, at the time. I remember, for example, we've always loved the diversity of our precise neighborhood, that it is not just Latino, but plenty of Blacks . . . and Whites when you got off Amsterdam,

> but Amsterdam Avenue was very majority Black and Latino then and I have watched that change completely, completely, completely in the almost thirty years that I've lived in this building now. For example, it still surprises me, I mean I've gotten used to it, but I still notice that White people walk east of Amsterdam now, and that's been true for fifteen years now. But it was absolutely, you would not see a White person walk east of Amsterdam before the mid-'90s—let alone college students living right on my block, which is now plenty. In fact, the landlord right next to us has a tendency to like the population. Uh, some landlords like to do that to the people in the neighborhood by raising the rent. We have made a point of choosing people that we feel need an affordable place to live. We almost never have a turnover in an apartment in our building, because people who want and need to live in the city, and need affordable rent, are never going to give up a stabilized lease, so that's been sort of a theme of our building.

Kelly has many friends in the neighborhood now, but in the 1980s, there were few other than those in her building. "We certainly became friendly with our neighborhood and the people in our neighborhood, the shop peoples . . . I also worked, for a couple years, at the Columbus-Amsterdam Business Improvement District, kind of at the end of the '90s, and that was really cool for me because I really got to know the businesses and the services on Columbus and Amsterdam from 96th to 110th, so I felt a new level of connection to the neighborhood." I ask about her family and friends who stayed in a neighborhood that was not particularly attractive at that time, curious about how they felt about the area.

> I think mostly people thought that it was kind of exotic. You know, everybody, my family, I think sort of enjoyed my life in New York City and really had no problem with it. But to further answer the question, I think the changes in the neighborhood started really many years ago, but in earnest, I would say, the last four years.
>
> It was remarkable to me that as everything on the Upper West Side was developing and gentrifying, or at least, say, 100th, where the library and that church are, and St. Michaels on the west side, all the way to 110th, not much change, and then in the '90s there was that flurry of development above, like from 108th to 110th, a bunch of cute little businesses opened, and they have flourished. That was a smattering. There was the Lion's Head Pub and Bistro 1018. That was always a nice restaurant, but then it, you know, changed hands and has been very successful all these years. And then, well, even in the past ten years that ramped up a little bit more, and then in the past five years that Village Pour House.

Frank

There are times when you can seduce people to your side as ethnographer and times when you cannot. Frank the East Harlem super is the person I had the most trouble with in terms of getting his story for this study. It is true I spent the least amount of time with him, especially after the faux pas incident, when he became less available to talk. Maybe I was overreacting a bit, but I went back to see him several times and had no luck. I chalk that up to my inability to persuade him to come around. The faux pas incident, as I call it, happened one day early on when Frank and I had a discussion about how little money supers make on the job and how valuable their time was. I took it upon myself to give him a tip for spending time talking with me, though as I reflect on it, he was not hinting that I should pay him for his time, since he was willing to take a break from work and chat with me. But nevertheless, after our next conversation, I took a twenty-dollar bill out of my pocket when he went to get something in a back room, folded the money tightly in my hand so he couldn't see it, and as I got up to leave gave him the hand shake "five" surreptitiously down by my side and passed the bill on to him that way, slipping it into his palm. He looked at me with such a shock and withdrew his hand and said, "Man, don't ever do that."

I thought it was a weird and unusual reaction, and he caught himself and apologized. His nervously expressive hands moved about the air, striking it with emphasis.

> Hey, I'm sorry I reacted that way, but I got to tell you why. You see, back in the day when I was using, that's how I used to cop and split. You know, the dealer would slip me the drug and I'd give him the money with that one move, so the cops, if they were watching, would not really see a transaction so much as a common, everyday, "we say hello to each other" handshake. We'd give each other five and walk away, no discussion, no nothing except that one move, so when you did that it just was like a trigger, man. That's all.

As it turned out, that wasn't all, because after that incident, Frank became very difficult to find, and I told my colleague about it and she said, "Oh my God, why did you do that?" I explained I did not think about it at the time; I just did it and didn't know it would mean what it did. I had never heard of anyone reacting that way, but I soon realized I had made a mistake and surmised that was the reason he made himself scarce. Perhaps he saw me as a gigantic trigger as well. I did see him a few more times, but Frank happens to be one of those individuals who make you recognize the complexity of the human being. You think you understand them, and you say to yourself, "I want to hear honestly what they are all about. I want to hear genuinely what they have to say and see

how they see their own experiences," but you really do not want that. You really do not want to know everything about this person, because what they really feel is not usually what's revealed to you.

Frank proudly showed me pictures of his four children when they were kids, and explained, "My kids are all in school, and when I had a family, I thought it was the best thing in the world. I think I miss them more than I ever thought I would. You see, when you're using, that's your family, that's your wife, that's your kids. When you're using, that's your everything. So I miss it [family], but I understand why it was taken away from me. I fucked that up. Nobody but me." Frank remarried his high school sweetheart and said he's in a good place now, since he's sober.

Contacts, sponsors, informants—whatever you call them—do not usually tell you how they really feel. They hold back, they camouflage, they bullshit, they hem and haw. But this is not the case with Frank, who expressed his true feelings in surprising ways. Frank talked about living in the neighborhood where he grew up near Pleasant Avenue:

> I didn't know at the time, but I was in the middle of the largest heroin distribution network in the city, maybe even the world, certainly in the United States. While I never knew the big-time players, my friend Billy C. did know the cousins, and the nephews and the kids of these kingpins, because we were all street buddies. At that time, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans didn't really all get along with Italians, but all of that was phasing out really. Tony Boy Abbamonte, Johnny "Echo" Eccellatti, Vincent Spurlock—all of these cats were part of the mob then, but they were also part of my childhood stories. Most of them were older than me, and I got to know Black guys, Spanish hustlers, and gangs that fought with them at times. My friend told me these stories, who is or was Italian, and used to tell me that the whole Italian community spoke out negatively against everybody who was not Italian. But in some ways, it made me more attracted to people different than me, but not to the extent that it did my friend. But for me, I was attracted to this big-butt Spanish girl whose mother was Cuban and father Sicilian, but I couldn't get close to her because of her father, but I never got over her.

Pleasant Avenue is not what it used to be: the old barber shop of Anthony "Fat Tony" Salerno, a crime boss of the Genovese crime family who ran the largest heroin and mob operation in the city, is no longer there; the brownstones along 114th are renovated and beautiful, tucked on a quiet dead-end street; and the avenue is pleasant and composed. Rao's is the only old landmark left on the avenue to speak of, and Costco shoppers and neighbors are the ones who fight these days—those battles are for parking spaces. One area Frank avoids, however, is known as "La Farmacia." "When you're using, you have to avoid people, places, and things. You can imagine what those things are, the people, too, but

the places are the hardest, because I live in the neighborhood and I have to catch myself not to go into certain spots." These places are "spatial triggers," locations that drug users, particularly heroin and intravenous users, avoid because they get urges when they come near those locales. Frank had memories of various kinds associated with these places. One of those spots he mentioned was only five-plus blocks from where he lived. I recorded my impression of this area in my field notes.

This is the drug-laden area of East Harlem, Lexington Avenue and Third Avenue (from 101st to 125th), especially Lexington Avenue and 110th Street, that is called "La Farmacia" because so many drugs can be "copped" in the area. I came to get a sense of the neighborhood and to check out the projects because of a case I was working on involving a murder. Though the murder occurred in the projects across the street from where I sat, my job was to assess the environment where the defendant was born and raised; these are the Lexington Ave projects called the "jects," and the first impressions I had thus far is that this is a junky copping area, abandoned buildings all around, a row of brownstones here and there, a candy store, and mom-and-pop stores in spots—a community that is low priority for the city, an arrest haven for the police, a garbage collection zone for sanitation, a bad neighborhood for schools, an illegitimate economy flourishing for teenagers and adults needing legitimate work, and a sanctuary for adults needing treatment for addictions. My second impression was that the community has a tradition of Spanish speakers, mostly Puerto Ricans, but today increasingly Mexican, with a smattering of Ecuadorians, Hondurans, Guatemalans, and Blacks, mostly in the projects. Gang behavior is evident from police records, and Black kids around here say gangs are necessary because they feel pressured by the Latinos.

I first walked around Lexington Avenue and into Casablanca Meat Market to see what kinds of meat they sold (mostly Spanish-oriented pork and beef products). Then I ventured over to Third Avenue and passed abandoned buildings on the corner of 110th and Third. In the middle of the block is the Hells Gate United States Post Office, just opposite the newly opened Food Choice Supermarket, where I went in to see what products they sold and again found mostly Spanish-related goods. You know you are in a "drug-copping zone" if you are approached by "steerers" (someone who steers you to a drug location). I wanted to see who would approach me and how soon, so I stood next to the subway station as a slew of people walked by, and as soon as I had rested my arms by my side, two kids, one Black and one Latino (maybe 16 to 18 years old) asked me what I was looking for. I found it interesting how the Black kid asked me but the Latino kid seemed to be the one controlling the product. He was cool and dressed differently and seemed to indicate he had the drugs. I surmised that Blacks are more numerous in population but not in control of

the drug trade at a certain level. This is true of other areas in the city except Central Harlem—that is, Blacks seem to have the numbers for the moment in the area, but Latinos are rapidly overtaking them. This I assume is the reason for the Latino/Black dealing duo.

Before I could say what I wanted, the Black kid said, "We got smack [heroin] and coke. Whatever you need." At about this time, another older Latino came over and asked me if I had the "shit," another name for heroin, and I got into a conversation with him about names for the drug. So I went from being a buyer to a seller in a matter of minutes. Meanwhile, the kids were standing there, and I said I don't want anything right now but maybe later, and I continued the talk with the older man, who was obviously a little high already. I said to him, "I haven't heard that name [shit] in a long time. I'm surprised you didn't say 'doojie.'" *Doojie* is yet another name for heroin, and it dates back a few decades. I said it based on what I thought the guy's age might be, though I knew he looked older than he probably is because the drug's ripping and running characteristics takes its toll. He was an older junkie nevertheless, and I must say they are rare these days. He looked surprised at my use of the term, but I thought he might recognize the word. He smiled a toothless smile, while looking me up and down.

"Doojie, man, you know the last time I heard 'doojie' was when Frankie 'Little Joe,' my best friend, OD'd [overdosed] like, damn, man '68–69, something like that, from a dealer named Bobby White. Boy, that was back in the day. Hey listen, you seen Pepe—Little Pepe today?"

I told him no.

"I need that special thing he got. You know what I mean?"

I left as he saw Pepe or somebody he recognized. I guess he kind of helped my presence around here, because I don't know anybody on the street here, but since I found myself talking to an old junkie, the "eyes" on the street might see me and think, "Hey, he's OK." But I had no sponsor at this scene yet, and I knew I had to come back here every day for a while to get that connection. I knew I could if I copped, but that's not the best option.

When Frank was broke early in his life and drugs had taken over every aspect of his being, he said he'd see money everywhere in the city: pennies on the sidewalk, subway riders dropping dollars as they entered turnstiles, street musicians with guitar cases filled with bills and change, panhandlers with cups full of bills. He said he saw one man everyday saying, "Can you spare a quarter to fix my disorder?" which he found amusing, but the man had a hat full of money. Yet Frank says sometimes he only had fifty cents in his pocket. He said he'd mumble to himself, "Life can get better and I know it will." It did, but it took a long time. Frank is a new arrival of sorts, an immigrant from the West Indies, and he harbors some prejudicial, you might say, thoughts and opinions—opinions that

are, I felt at times, hard to digest. For example, he feels that the average Puerto Rican and Black American

> don't wanna work or get ahead. They are just lazy. The don't wanna work, because if they did, they would not be begging on the street or taking handouts from the government. They welfare queens and kings, if you ask me. You different, because you got a degree, but the average one of these so-called New York niggers, they don't wanna do nothing. And when I talk about niggers, I'm talking about Puerto Rican niggers, Spanish niggers, Chink [Chinese] niggers, and White boy niggers, too. You see, if they don't wanna work and can't get a job, it's they're fault. What White man can't get a job in America, you tell me? They'd give a White man this fucking super's job in a minute if they could find a White man to take it, but they can't.

When I talked with Frank and the other supers, one theme emerged repeatedly. Most of them felt the need to espouse the dominant paradigm of hard work and social responsibility—middle-class values of self-reliance, personal responsibility, and sacrifice. Only one mentioned larger structural forces as complicit in the way things are. Unemployment was never mentioned as caused by larger forces outside the individual. And the reason is that to them, there is always work to be had. These themes are contrary to the inner narratives, where they say what's really on their minds and are critical of government and challenge the status quo. Whenever I encounter talk such as what I heard from Frank, I admit to being embarrassed and occasionally stunned, because I do not expect people to express such ignorance and it unnerves me. I had a similar experience with a homeless man in the tunnels, but he was known as a hater of African Americans and a racist, and I was prepared to deal with him. But as far as Frank was concerned, I was not ready to hear what he had to say, and I was surprised at his views, conservative as they were. Yet I understand that is the case for many first-generation immigrants, who see opportunity everywhere and cannot fathom why everyone cannot make it; they swallow the rhetoric of the dominant narrative. Frank spoke about a friend who is also a first-generation immigrant, albeit from another part of the world. "My friend from India came here as a highly trained engineer and couldn't find a job, so he's driving a taxi. But he said he wanted to do the super work but it pays too little money for him. He said he would do both jobs, but his wife won't let him. He's already working the taxi at night and doing a delivery service job part-time during the day. But these fucking Puerto Ricans are lazy bums. The Blacks, too. They have every opportunity, and look what they do." I asked Frank why he felt the way he did, and this led to a torrent of expletives that spoke as much about new-arrival immigrants as it does about race, class, and prejudice. Because first-generation immigrants work

extremely hard at multiple jobs that most other Americans will not do, they see anyone doing less than what they do as trifling and not up to the standards they find endearing. I recently had a conversation with a sociologist who happens to be an immigrant, who explained,

> If a newly undocumented worker is willing to work several jobs and sees those already here begging or doing nothing, of course they will see those people as unwilling to work hard. Most of us who are immigrants are conservative because we see the host society, the country that has embraced us, often in times of despair, as our savior. So I will always vote if I could vote. I would gladly vote. A lot of Americans don't vote. But I would. I will always obey the law, too, and I think and believe everyone else should as well. If you're an immigrant, you are frightened of breaking any laws with the possibility of having to be deported. So yes, if you're an immigrant, you are basically and usually quite conservative.[15]

Frank's laments about fellow Hispanics and Blacks notwithstanding, it appears he is having his own problems as they relate to being West Indian Black, and doing the work he does, servicing people, makes him feel superior. He did say on occasion that he would never go back to the island to live because he is an American now, and that statement suggests that he is settled here and has therefore lost primary group contacts back home. Since he lost his family by using drugs, he has also lost some primary group contacts here as well. This puts him in a vulnerable position of having few friends and family members as supports. I think he is bitter about what has happened to him and takes it out on Puerto Ricans and Blacks, using them as scapegoats to vent his frustrations. I have not talked to him lately, and it is not out of the question to have further conversations later on. But for now, he is like a "lost ball in high weeds."

Old-WorldC ulture

Sharif, casually and unstereotypically dressed for a super, wears a linen shirt and jeans and a pair of brown loafers. Medium build, fit and energetic, with a warm smile and friendly manner about him, he is not shy and opens up to the conversation right away. "I was born in a Middle Eastern country, and I came here 12 years ago," he tells me.

> I been a super most of that time, and I might tell you it is not too bad nor too good a job to have. It has its ups and downs. What I do like about the job is you got a place to live, you make good money, you can earn a decent living. You learn a different trade and its steady work. But also it's a union job and you can retire with this job. About every three years you get a new contract negotiated. You get free legal advice from the union. But I gotta tell you, I'm not much of a union

guy, but I tell you I like what I get, which is union insurance, steady medical benefits, and pension benefits.

He tells me how he got his job and about the Middle Eastern network.

First of all, there is a kind of Middle Eastern network, because back in the day about 15 years ago, we was very tribal, if you understand. By that I mean everybody who was Middle Eastern knew everybody else who was Middle Eastern, and you got married to a Middle Eastern and everybody who came to your wedding was Middle Eastern. That's how small the community was then. So if I would have a few beers at a local bar and the owner would say, "Find me a guy who can do this or that kinda work," then somebody would step up. So one day, somebody needed a guy who could fix wires. OK, I find a Middle Eastern guy to fix wires, electricity, and they needed somebody to do some plumbing work, and I find a Middle Eastern guy to do plumbing work. So one day, they come up and say they in need of a super-type guy, so I take the job.

When Sharif speaks of the Middle Eastern network, he is not talking about Black and Puerto Rican Middle Easterners. Flynn, Tolton, Allan, Sharif, and Larry are from somewhere else, and as such, the connection to jobs fits into the hidden conceptualization of labor gentrification in the neighborhoods in general and New York City more specifically. It is important to consider that the super informant raises questions about the migration factor here, because the super as an occupation is part of a complex labor force and network.

But the issue of race and status is also part of the dynamic, and as such we begin to see how the story of displaced Black supers fits into the migration pattern, since new arrivals are often chosen to fill these jobs. Yet these are not "shit" jobs but skilled professions, and therefore not just any new arrival can fill them. The question of how many Black supers were displaced and why over time is not known. Sharif started life back in the Old World and still feels close to what he calls "Old-World culture" "because it's very personal to me. You see, my father was a man who believed in social justice, and he passed this on to me and my brothers, this social consciousness, because of certain historical events. My father's first job as far I remember was when he first worked at an elementary school when we grew up. Most of my early life as a kid was caught up in sports, but my father didn't want us to play sports except gymnastics. I wanted to play soccer, but my father said no ball sports. No ball sports at all."

Sharif's father told him in no uncertain terms not to get involved in sports, especially with those "balls," meaning soccer, because it was not a worthwhile thing to do. "He said no sports with a ball should I involve myself. His voice was very harsh when he'd say this to me. He said I could do gymnastics, but

enough asking him about the balls already. He didn't like ball sports. He felt it was evil or useless, I don't know which. No, I think because he felt ball sports was a waste of time. But I was a natural. I could kick the ball."

Sharif says he does the opposite for his own son by trying to get him to play soccer, but the boy only likes to watch cartoons on television. He admits that his kids (who are ages 5 and 9) watch too much television, but he does not like to discipline them too much.

> One of my kids ask me why can't they have smell-a-vision. And I ask him what was that, and he said it's a television where he could smell all the good food Sponge Bob eats. Well, that's just American culture talking through him. And that's why at the same time my kids disappoint me, too, because they don't have the ability here, living an American life, to listen to their parents, because there are so many other "parents" or authorities they can or do listen to. Television is like a parent, teachers are like a parent, and other kids and their friends are like a parent, too. My kids get discipline from school just like they get disciplined at home. But I try not to be like my father was with me and my brothers. I try not to punish them for every little thing.

His concern about the influence of popular culture is evident in his discussion of the television shows the kids watch.

> My kids watches "Sponge Bob" like I tell you, and they like Disney World. When I grew up, we had no chance to think about ourselves. But the kids in America are born and bred to think about me, me, me. I never became that way or my brothers and sisters. And no matter what I tell them, they still see things the American way, because they are American now. This sense of individualism is a problem, you know why? I'll tell you why. When I try to teach my kids the language of my parents, they think its old fashion, and they say they are American now and want to speak English.

Sharif, whose image is contrary to that of most blue-collar workers, says this about his children: "I know they are not proud of what I do and certainly don't wanna grow up to be like me, or do what I do, but I give them a decent life no matter what anybody says. But I don't think television helps very much either. Nothing on television says anything good about the hardest-working people who wear dirty clothes when they work."

These statements speak volumes about the images his children get about class stereotypes depicted on television and his kids' reaction to them. And the class stereotypes are blatantly portrayed: lawyers are viewed as smart, debonair, brilliant types, and janitors are seen as stupid, even lazy undocumented aliens. These matters of self-image affect not only the workers but everyone else,

including their children, who receive misleading and often times false information about what work is in the society. Self-esteem issues abound in conversations with supers, who feel they are not taken seriously by society, a perception they feel is wrong.

Supers like Sharif, who probably makes at least $80,000 a year (he mentioned the figure in an earlier conversation), defy the stereotypical image of the lowly super—especially since he tells me he always wanted to dress like the stars he idolized in Hollywood movies. I believe this is the way he wants his image to be seen by not only tenants but all those he encounters. He is particularly sensitive about his social relationship role in his job, and even though he delegates much of the duties, he sees the social relationship between him and the tenants (both the cooperative contingent and the rent-stabilized group) as one of the most significant aspects of his work.

As a matter of fact, social relationships were mentioned by all the supers as a very important part of their job. Allan explains:

> If you were to ask me what my most important role is, and by that I mean what I consider the one thing I prize most, it would be my relationships, my getting along with the people in my building. If you don't know how to deal with people, you in the wrong business. This is a people business, because whether you like them or not or whether they like you or not, you got to get along with them. I wouldn't say they are the difference between whether I live or die or not, but I know if they wanted to, they could get me fired. But if you are not respectful to the people who live here, you have no business trying to do work here, because it will not be beneficial, no way you look at it.

The super is often times looked down on by tenants, and the media perception of the super is also in play. Most images of blue-collar workers in general are negative, bordering on stereotypes. We have seen the "leering" construction worker "catcalling" women as they pass and plumbers on shows like *Home Improvement* who make big salaries but do little quality work. These images depict blue-collar workers as caricatures, not as real human beings. Today, there are very few accurate dramatic representations of blue-collar workers like those from before WWII that portrayed people in working-class occupations with dignity.

I realize doormen and porters (as employees of the super) would not have anything negative to say about the super, so when asked, it was not surprising that they spoke highly of supers. The former tenant, however, who felt Sharif was a good person also expressed some reservations about where he gets his money. "I don't know if a super makes that much money, but his lifestyle seems to me above that of a super. I believe he works in another building or

has something going on with other supers, or something like that, in order to live the way he does. And he does have two kids and a wife who dresses like a fashion plate." However, these observations do not necessarily mean anything nefarious, because there are many ways to get suits and fashionable clothes in the city without paying top price for them, and this aspect of his life is probably not worth pursuing. My interest lies in how he is as a person and super, and until I find a tenant or others to besmirch his character, he appears to be a regular citizen and worthy of the benefit of the doubt.

In ways small and large, Sharif is a "family man"; this fact is seconded by present and past tenants and others who know him. He has only two kids, who for all intents and purposes appear happy and well-adjusted to life in the United States. He provides well for them but is concerned about what he calls their "culture training," or lack thereof, because of the influence of American culture overshadowing his Middle Eastern upbringing and the values he wants to impart to his children. The time he spends doing the duties of super is all done with the proviso that family comes first, though he knows there will be times he must forego family duties for the sake of the job. "They know about the '24-hour rule,'" he says to me. "They know I have emergency situations that I must attend to, and so there is no problem there. The problem comes when I actually have to leave the dinner table or leave them in the middle of a story or a game we're playing. That's when the problem comes. I could see, many years later, them saying I wasn't there for them or something like that, so that's why I take my time to explain to them that Daddy has to do these things so they can have that flat screen TV or that new iPhone or video game."

In other words, no matter how much explaining is done, it is these times when Sharif must answer emergencies that arise under his watch that he feels will have consequences later on in his family's lives. In situations where many such calls come back to back, it creates stress on Sharif's wife and kids and other family obligations. His wife, Zahara, was scheduled to be asked what impact his work as super had on their relationship, but since she refused to answer these questions, he said he'd answered them for her. He said we could play a little game and he would act like he was her and I would ask him the questions. I agreed, not really sure it would mean much, but I never got around to doing this.

I might add that the degree to which Sharif's wife should be involved in his work is questionable. Sharif as a super obviously receives phone calls and knocks on his door at all hours, and his wife will occasionally be the one to answer. This would be one example of her involvement. These obligations might conflict with the daily house routines expected of her to maintain as well as foster the idea that his job never leaves him or he never leaves the job. In other words, he doesn't leave the job once he leaves the office. Some building-related

problems that the super must attend to cannot wait until the next day to be solved, though they often do.

This idea about emergencies keeps cropping up, and Everett C. Hughes made a relevant point here.

> The comparative student of man's work learns about doctors by studying plumbers; and about prostitutes by studying psychiatrists. This is not to suggest any degree of similarity greater than chance expectations between the members of these pairs, but simply to indicate that the student starts with the assumption that all kinds of work belong in the same series, regardless of their places in prestige or ethical ratings. In order to learn, however, one must find a frame of reference applicable to all cases without regard to such ratings. To this end we seek for the common themes in human work.[16]

What are the common themes in human work? Perseverance, dedication, skill, and even jealousy and resentment are a few examples, since work is more than the sum of its parts. Take the matter of resentment and jealousy, for example. Most supers feel some tinge of resentment and a bit of jealousy regarding tenants at the beginning of their tenure, but this quickly fades as they continue on the job. Many feel tenants view them with mild disdain, a little jealousy, perhaps even resentment as well. It is not so much because of what the super owns or has in terms of possessions, because a lot of times tenants see little of the super outside of the apartment house and the role of super. For example, most tenants do not know what car the super might drive, what church they attend, what their favorite sport is, or anything of a personal nature. Most tenants never actually see how the super lives by visiting his abode.

The resentment comes from the lack of interest the super pays to tenant needs and the fact that the super is more loyal to the landlord than to them. Supers who are looked down on by tenants may feel a degree of power nevertheless in their ability to refuse work they think beneath him and pawn it off to subordinates (e.g., by reserving garbage collection for Mexican workers).

But another fly in the ointment are biased attitudes from those in the workplace. What happens when the super is a woman? How does the dynamic change?

Athena spoke to this women super issue:

> Let me begin by saying that I get along with tenants just fine, but they might not all get along with me, but that's another story. Many of them, I don't quite know what to say, but many of them appreciate my style when I'm in their homes. And this may be a gender thing, and I don't know if it is or not, because my father was the same way. I mean not only was he a thorough worker, but he was

a clean worker. Now keep in mind, most of where I saw him working was in our own home, and my mother, well, God bless him if he made a bloody mess and my mother happened to walk by, you know. So for me, that was part of the way everyday work was done; you worked clean. And he was, as I say, a machinist in an airline, and you know you can't have any sloppy work when you're working in an aircraft, no loose screws or bolts lying around. You gotta work clean, so I picked that up from him rather than it being some kind of gender thing. Many guys work this way, of course, too. But when I go into somebody's home, I treat it just like I would treat my own home. If I have to take my shoes off, I will do that, because I have no problem taking my shoes off. I cover everything when I work so dust and dirt don't get on other appliances. As a matter of fact, I've had tenants tell me that the place was cleaner when I left than when I came in, and they be so embarrassed when they say, "Oh, I'm so sorry, I saw you washed the dishes."

But I had done this because I wanted to clean the sink and wanted things to be spotless. Well, that's how I feel, because I'd rather be overly clean than someone walk in and think that I made something dirty. So I just make sure there is no fingerprints on the wall, and all that kind of thing that tenants are grateful for. And I've often been told that they would never call the previous super because he was so filthy. He was smelly and dirty, and they had to wash fingerprints off the ceiling, and one tenant said when they ask him for a favor and he came and left the whole place in an awful mess, they never called him again.

Sometimes some of them may be a little hesitant, embarrassed, I use the word, especially some of the men. They might say, well, they should know how to fix this. And if they don't know how to fix something, especially if they don't know how to fix it now, it's a personal thing. But sometimes, and it's not all buildings, but sometimes "it's my dresser drawer got stuck" or "I can't open my suitcase or my file cabinet." You know, those kind of personal things. Sometimes there's an awkwardness—they feel embarrassment that she knows how to do it and I don't.

These comments came when I mentioned how people in certain professions, like supers, delivery boys and girls, messengers, mail carriers, bank clerks, and bodega clerks, are often seen but not paid much attention. These are folks we see every day but don't really notice, and when we see them outside their professional role, we just can't seem to place them. We know we've seen them somewhere but can't quite figure out where. We certainly don't know their names or anything about them. They are just there to serve us. If you ask the tenants in any building what car the super drives, they won't know. If you ask them where the super goes on vacation or what his wife's name is, they would not be able to tell you.

I wanted to know more about how Athena felt in this mostly all-male world she found herself in and what problems she encountered with gender issues in the super's domain. Sitting across from me, now more comfortable with the

conversation, she laughed and adjusted herself in her chair. But then I noticed a sterner sincerity in her demeanor and a sense of disappointment.

> But, you know, I'm very polite, I don't curse; I'm not someone that swears. I have really found it very difficult to get the job and get the interview. And I have had managers be very frank with me and tell me, especially if it's a co-op building. I should say, by the way, that has changed everything, because when it was a landlord, you had one boss. And that boss would interview you and that boss would look at you and say all right, this man or woman is going to take good care of my property, of my personal financial investment. I own that building and I trust that person is going to take care of my investment. Now that it's a co-op, the manager doesn't own it, because the manager is an employee in the same way the super is an employee. The folks who are running it are not real estate professionals. Now you might see one or two once in a while—bankers, secretaries, data entry people. You know their skill is not particularly real estate. So I have had managers where I've had that great interview with them and they say, "Wow, you're so knowledgeable. I think you're a shoo-in for this job." I've had many say to me, "Boy, you're like heads above these other candidates." And then I meet the board and my phone is not ringing. I call them back and say, "Gee, what happened?" And I can't tell you how many times, because it's been too many times, they say, "I'm gonna be very honest with you, but we can't hire a woman." They themselves just say they feel it was just awkward, or they think it's going to be awkward with the staff. I usually don't have that problem if it's only me working, but when there is a staff involved, they say, "Well, the guys are not gonna listen to you" or "We don't have locker room for you," but that's not an issue for me. I tell them, "Hey, if I gotta get dressed in the boiler room, I get dressed in the boiler room." But they are just fearful. The board is just fearful. So that's been the obstacle.

This conversation reminds me of how difficult it was to get steady work as a minority person when discrimination was commonplace. When I was doing high steel work with my brother, it was similar to Athena's issues. It was difficult to get called in the shop, because none of the White guys wanted to apprentice us, until one day an older Italian man came up and chose my brother to work on a job with him. But going on the job every day and not being picked to work on a crew was quite painful, because we knew and saw young men from Italy (just arrived, who did not speak any English) chosen to work while my brother and I were passed over. We knew this was wrong, but there was nothing we could do about it. I can only imagine what it must be like to be a woman.

Tenants in large buildings do not really interact with the super much, except in emergency situations, and even after getting to know the super, they still see him or her as an emergency worker who is there to help them when needed. But I should state that many supers have bad reputations because they are seen

as "spies" for the landowner, and that stigma makes them disliked in the community of tenants. This is especially true when the super is viewed as two-faced and as an informant alerting the landowner to every misdeed of the tenant. But there are supers who regularly make it their business to see tenants and take their complaints head on. This is especially true of newer buildings, where there is less damage to deal with. Older buildings tend to have more problems and therefore more complaints. It is here the supers make themselves scarce as possible.

I asked supers about how changes in the neighborhood may affect their status. More specifically, I wanted to know if the gentrification of a neighborhood would reduce their labor power. Take, for example, comments made by Allan, Sharif, and Athena in this regard. I asked each of them whether they felt the super was being reduced in importance by the explosion of condos and co-ops in the neighborhood. This is what Sharif had to say:

> I think it's a ridiculous question, because everybody knows the reason you lose your job is because you fuck something up or you treat people like shit or something along those lines. Who told you that? Nobody gets rid of a good man. I can tell you that. The condo situation that I'm in here is a case in point. Would I be fired if I'm doing my job? No, I don't think so. Listen, you need a good man in your building, and I believe they are hard to come by. Plus, it ain't easy getting somebody out whose in and been in for a while, or even if they haven't been in for a while, because for me, you gotta deal with the union, and the union don't let people get fired without a damn good reason. So if somebody gets canned in this business, it ain't because of no changes in the neighborhood, it's because they did something to piss somebody off or even piss a whole lotta people off.

Athena commented that she might actually benefit from this kind of situation where the co-op board fires the old super because the place has turned co-op and the old super is now reduced to a porter status. A co-op building may no longer need this super because they hire plumbers and electricians as needed and only need the present super as a porter. This presumably could be because the present super does not have the various skills needed to do the work or the present super is not well liked or any number of reasons. He may get drunk on the job, use drugs, or be unavailable or an otherwise recalcitrant individual.

> If they were smart enough and not be concerned about hiring a woman, I might be a person, they might say, we'd like to replace our old super with. Someone who has a little better knowledge on modern technology. Someone who can communicate with us in a way through emails, or who has writing skills. And now that we are upgrading our building and now that it's no longer under the thumb of the landlord, we want to make certain improvements on the building. Landlords can

be notorious in that they just want to get the job done. "I don't want a Michelangelo up there painting the apartment," they say, "I just want clean white walls." They don't care if the light switches have been painted over. But the new home owner, not tenant anymore, they will notice that the light switches have been painted over and that paint is dipped on my floor boards. So now they want the light switches painted in a different way. Things are no longer acceptable as they were. They may want someone who is energy efficient, a person who knows about HPHD systems, or someone familiar with green roots. Or they may just want to make improvements to the building and wanna know that they have the staff or outside consultant that can help guide us to make recommendations and may feel the old super was not adequate.

Allan felt confident as well:

I don't feel any threat to my job, because the superintendent in a condo is protected by the city. It comes in the building book and validated by the city. And you don't want just anybody coming and going in your building. You always want to have somebody in the building that you know. Most of the tenants in my building, I know. No. You need to have someone in your building at all times, and that's the super. So the answer is no, I don't think my job is in jeopardy with these new condos and co-ops. No, not at all. I don't think you get demoted in the co-op that way because of those reasons, because you don't wanna hire just anybody to work in your building. You want someone you can trust, and I think you will always need someone to work in the building all the time. You don't wanna have to call someone to shovel the snow, for example . . . I'm here, I can do immediate action. These guys will have to sleep over night. And in the winter time, when the snow is out, it's crazy. I'm out like four o'clock in the morning. So by the time people get up to go to work in the morning, they can't even tell it's been snowing on our block. So I don't think they want something like that. You always wanna have someone in the building. Most of my tenants are not at home during the day. For example, you have a problem with the dishwasher, what you gonna do? Would you give that guy a key? You know the super. You know him for 10, 11 years. You know his family and he knows yours. You trust him with your keys and nobody's gonna touch anything if he comes into your place and you're not there, but you're not going to do that with a stranger who happens to come back once in a while to do some repairs. I'm happy with my job, and the money don't matter as much to me as being happy with what I'm doing.

Other supers opine on this issue. Take Flynn, for example, who is more contrarian and works less than other supers in the study. As a matter of fact, Flynn's situation is similar to Craig's, which is to say that he has been reduced in his work hours from one status to another.

> I can tell you, around here it's not much of a typical day, because I only work maybe three hours out of the day. In this building, which is as I said a co-op, and well, anything that happens in this building, well, they won't call me, they will call someone else they know. So I lose on that end. And my job in this building is the cleaning. I do repairs and stuff like that, but that is on a as-need-be basis, but that is not in the apartments itself. I'm more of the person who deals with the common areas. The lights outside, changing fixtures or changing light bulbs. I would say an hour or two hours max solid work in a day. Other than that, I'm sitting here watching basketball or talking to the next-door super out there. This is a slow job. This is slow work that is specific I would say to co-ops, because when you live in a co-op, you only basically need a porter to clean up the building, and everybody else calls their own locksmith, plumber, electrician, whatever. And that's mostly what happens in the co-ops. This is basically a job for a guy who has retired.

This last statement is somewhat of a contradiction, because earlier he said he had not heard of anyone being reduced to a porter, but here he is saying the exact opposite. He is saying his duties have been reduced. His predecessor worked full time in the same building before it became a co-op, but now that the building is a co-op, Flynn works only two or three hours a week, and the major repairs in the apartments are done by licensed plumbers and electricians.

There are two other issues here to consider: one is the larger apartment buildings, which need a super perhaps because of the sheer volume of work, and the other is whether or not the super is in the union. What all this means is that the future is bright for supers' skills—plumbing, electrical work, and the like—but not for supers per se, who might find themselves reduced to piece work or part-time work instead of salaried work.

Allan and Sharif's views are opposite of Craig's, and both have work schedules based on a daily worksheet and where they greet tenants every morning to receive those who have complaints. Flynn, on the other hand, generally avoids tenants and is rarely called upon to do work in his building. He, Tolton, Larry, and Athena spoke to the issue of security in their job.

Athena had this to say:

> To answer your question about whether I think I will have this job as long as I would like, the answer is no, I don't. One of the oddities that I have found under the terms of gender is I consider myself a very polite person. I'm very well spoken. I'm not someone who shouts or curses, like I said before. But I notice sometimes when I give instructions or a command to, let's say, a vendor, an outside person more so than my own staff, I notice the way they take what I say, every so often there has been a pushback. And I think the pushback is, "A woman is telling me this?" You know what I'm saying? "A woman is telling me what to do?" And at the

> same time, I've heard men telling them and cursing, "Get the fuck over here and do this blah blah," and the vendors don't object to that. So I say wow. But I don't know why I brought that up, but you see what I mean. I know you ask about the security matter. So let me get back to your question. Let's say the major insecurity is being co-ops. That is the major insecurity. It's being co-ops. Boards come and go. Board presidents come and go. Every year, and every June in New York City. A lot of these superintendent meetings, people be talking about the annual meetings, we'll have a new board. What does that mean? There may be someone that over the past year, that same someone who may turn out to be the board president is that same person you told they had to move their stuff to another locker, or you told them that they couldn't park here or there. And they may remember I asked them to follow a rule or something. You understand? And then when the new board is chosen, that person (who may not like you because of your past dealings with them) is now the new board president. It can be very disconcerting. Because you have to win the board over as opposed to having just a landlord, where its one consistent boss, where you have this consistent relationship.

Flynn answered the first part of the question about whether he'd ever heard of anyone being reduced to a porter:

> No, I have not. You are either a super or you're not. It's either you're in or you're out. By that I mean if I'm doing my job and the building is clean and everything is taken care of, then they can't fire me. If they were to tell me I was fired, I would have one question for them. What's the reason? If it's not because of the building being unkempt, then what's the reason? After that I would have no problem with it, because as I mentioned, there is no security here. I have no health insurance, no benefits of any kind. If they say go, I have to go. And if the board say I go, I go. I know that. And there is nothing I can do. It's like here today, gone tomorrow. But I wouldn't leave here right away anyhow. I would need some time to find another place. Other than that, there is nothing I could do. I don't feel secure at this job right now, and I've been here for five years now. And during those five years, I have never had a vacation. I've never had a raise. It's just you get a free apartment and a salary every two weeks, which is peanuts. But that's basically it. This job is for a retired super person.

While Flynn did not speak about salary specifically, he did say "it was peanuts" and that the bulk of his money making occurs when he actually works in people's apartments and gets tips for doing work not associated with his duties as super. On the other hand, Tolton and Larry were both more oblique in their assessment of the situation. Tolton said,

> The work never ends, because you are always wanted, no matter what time it is. I think you can be put out, if you know what I mean. The Black man is not secure

in his family, he's not secure in the society he lives in, and he's not secure in his job life either, you know. He's not secure because he don't control the life he leads now. Why should he feel secure in a job where the people who come there are his bosses in this condominium thing? Why should he feel secure when he got different bosses with different attitudes and ideas that contrary to himself? Now me, myself, I don't worry for nothing about this kinda situation, because I work hard and keep my place no matter who take over. If you need some good work done, I mean the best work done, you come to me. But I think you can be tossed out at any time if you not secure, man. You can be tossed out.

I mentioned to Larry my curiosity about co-ops and condos and whether supers who work in condos and co-ops will no longer be needed in the future. I used his son as an example in order to press the point home more succinctly. Larry said,

Right now when they buy a building or take over a building and tenants own the building, just like they own this one, what happens is they are confronted with a situation of having a super there for a long time and a super that has been there for like 10, 12 years working. They can get rid of him if they want to, but there is so much loyalty there, it will be hard to do that if there ain't no real cause. Now if they sold the building, they might be able to get rid of the super by saying they want to bring in their own people. I've seen that happen, where they bring in their own people and pay them less money. So I see that, you know. Now these co-op boards can do whatever they want, and some boards do get rid of supers and do the work themselves. You got all kinds to make a world, and I wouldn't put it past none of them to do what it is you say. But you say the man was kicked out, well, I think you gotta think about what kinda man was he. If he was a good, hardworking, honest man, they ain't had no cause to do that to him. But I would just like to know what kind a man he was.

Athena said of her typical day,

I like to be in the lobby preferably when the residents are leaving for work in the morning. That means usually about 7:00 or 8:00, but that depends, because when I worked in very wealthy buildings, most people are usually out the door at six o'clock. Those were people who mostly worked in the financial trades downtown on Wall Street. They were out there and usually had to be at work at seven. I like to be present and in the lobby just to see if some tenant had last minute thoughts.

I make sure the morning shift and I are on the same page, and this is true whether I'm by myself or if there is a staff. Now if there is a staff, we go over what we are doing this day. We discuss what I need to do or what they need to do. And that rush usually ends for me around 9:00 or 9:30. And that's when I usually go

> out for my breakfast. That's my downtime. The building is empty now. The kids in the building are off to school, nannies that were supposed to come in, they're there. Everyone is in place where they are supposed to be, and I take my *New York Times* and go over to the diner for peace and quiet.

For Athena, the day is fairly quiet for her, unless there is a project, until about two or three o'clock. It's almost as if she has a split shift, because now she is getting a change of staff if she has a staff, or if she's on her own, she then knows things are going to change in the building.

> For instance, if there are contractors in the building, then I have to make sure that they're starting to clean up and get out. Typically the building wants them out by four o'clock before tenants start to come back. So typically they are out by 4:00, so then I'm making sure everything is clean and neat. I know that if it's a building with children, the children start coming home between 3:00 and 4:00, and I want all that set in place, and I like to be present with the kids coming in, that they are safe and where they should be. And again when the parents come in at 5:00 or 6:00, I like to be present when they come in, too. Again, I have a sort of strange split shift. My day is about 12 hours. From 6:00 until 6:00 or 6:00 to 7:00, and that time in the middle, I use that to do doctor's appointments, run errands, that sorta thing in between.

Now the focus shifts to a super whose relationship with the building he supervises, and the neighborhood he lives in, is more complex, tentative, and problematic.

CHAPTER 4

Doing What Supers Do

Daily Duties

In this job, the work shows in your hands.

His name is Larry, and he has been around for several decades and could certainly be considered a super-super. Walk down the block where he carries out his daily duties, and his immaculate handiwork is strikingly evident. The plants are well manicured, the sidewalk is cleanly swept, and even the honey locust trees are trimmed. The job of the super is multifaceted and requires performing minor repairs; supervising staff, which includes the concierge, porters, and handymen; strong communications skills, particularly in dealing with tenants; and maintaining the building's basic operating systems. But to maintain the streetscape outside the building proper is beyond perhaps the call of duty. "My job is basically to work with the people in my building and do what it takes to make the place run smoothly. But the sidewalk is part of the block where I work on other buildings, too," says Larry, whose working knowledge or "practical know-how," which is "knowledge in the hands," began with his father before he came to the city. His father once told him, "When you got to make do, do what you're told to do, which is to say, when you make the effort to follow the instructions that someone with more skills than you shows you, that's making do. But one thing for sure in this job, the work shows in your hands." The manual competence seemingly lost to the present generation is alive and well with supers like Larry and others you will meet. The work they do is meaningful and useful, and Larry expressed his satisfaction with the work every time I spoke with him. There is no sense of depersonalization in the work or alienation of labor here. It is through apprenticeship that working knowledge emerges, and supers usually begin their careers as doormen, porters, or handymen and progressively move up to becoming superintendents, and some learn

from working with parents or relatives. But there are other skills necessary to the profession that are not necessarily taught by anyone. As Larry, the oldest super, noted, "If you can't deal with people, or if you don't know how to deal with people, you are not going to do very well on this job."

The role of super is a job where people skills are required, and these skills, according to tenants, involve a more complex array of talents than those listed on job descriptions or voiced by the supers themselves; one such skill is a certain ability to manipulate, or lie, in order to convince tenants comply with landlord desires. This is not to paint all supers with such a broad brush, because obviously not all supers fit this designation, but to overlook how tenants see their supers would be just as egregious. Supers are the foot soldiers in the business of keeping tenants satisfied, and in that way, it is one of the helping professions similar to innkeepers, maids, janitors, and doctors, but it is also part of the service industry, which is about attending to the needs of others.

The building on the corner of 121st Street is more than a hundred years old, with an elaborate latticed wrought-iron gate (circa 1920s), an immaculate marble floor, a spotless yellow marble lobby, and an art deco balloon lighting fixture in the lobby ceiling. Standing in the center near an ornate Beaux arts fireplace with his worker outfit of black trousers and black rubber knee-high boots is Larry, the elder, a tall, well-built man in his sixties who has worked in the building and the block for eight years. He is affable and down to earth, hailing from the Carolinas. He came to New York as a young man to get work back in mid-1960s.

> My original home is Charleston, South Carolina, and I came to New York City in 1967. I came to New York because a lot of my friends in my hometown, back down where I lived, died. They be driving around in their cars, racing and drinking and carrying on, and a bunch of them died. You see, there was this special curve in the road that was known to be dangerous and risky to travel fast around, but you know, as kids, they started to dare each other to try and make it around that crazy curve, and more than ten or more of my friends didn't make it and was killed there. I told my father I wanted to get away from there, and his reaction was to buy me a car, and I told him I didn't want no car since all my friends got killed messing with them cars. So I told him I wanted a ticket to New York, where my sisters were staying at the time. I had three sisters up here. The first job I got up here was not like this one. I was only making like fifty bucks a week. And I worked for this place where they had this steam machine in the Garment District. In this job, they dealt in exotic features. I ain't seen so many different features in my life. I mean crazy, real crazy, features like ostrich, marabou, pheasant, goose, pigeon, crow, swan—you name it, they had there. We had so many different kinds, and he [the boss] used to sell them for $70 a pound, and we had the factory to do that process where the lady workers would have the feathers on a string

about three feet long, and they used to make hats and stuff with. Now we had a big room, and when I went there, you had about eighty girls working there. And they had this little single steamer there, and you would put the feathers under that steamer in order to fluff 'em out.

Larry soon took notice of this feather-steaming process and mentioned to the supervisor of the place that he thought there was a better way to do steaming. He told the boss that if he took a string of feathers, not just a single string but thousands of feathers on a string, and let them all the steam in front of three big fans, it would be better than what they were doing their way. "So I guess you could say I came up with a new system where you could take thousands of feathers. I was doing a better job than the girls was doing with the single strings. Now before I started this process, they would be sending out maybe 5,000 packs of those feathers in a week—now we could send out 5,000 in a day."

Larry's new inventive way of steaming the feathers got the attention of the company boss, who sent him to other locations, including overseas to Antwerp, Belgium, to spread this method, and it garnered him a big raise as well. But it also caused him some anxiety, because he felt he should have been given a patent on the process, which he did not get, and he wanted all the young women who were losing their jobs because of his invention not to be fired but to be given jobs in different parts of the factory. None of those things happened, and at age 22, he began work at another job, learning different sets of skills.

After I left the job at the feather factory, I got a job working for Holiday Inn, basically doing trouble-shooting, maintenance-type work. That job started here in the states, and quickly I got calls to go all over the world. I usually got to work with a team of other workers, repairing toilets, fixing air conditioners, replacing broken windows—you name it, we did it. I worked for Holiday Inn for like 12 years. But you have to understand, with me traveling all over the place, I couldn't see my family. I couldn't see nobody. They would send twenty of us to some place to complete a job. And by the time we complete that job, they got like five other jobs for us to do. And this would go on and on. And I never had a chance to visit the family and stuff, and so I just decided to just quit. And so I meet this guy, this Jewish guy who had a business fixing people's houses, and we had the same date of birthday.

It was December 11, 1944. He was a real good man and we became good friends, and I started working for him. He would send me all over New Jersey to do people's houses, inside work, painting, plastering, then outside work like roofing. The first step in doing this type of work is you gotta be honest. For instance, people, they not gonna stay there at home all day while you paint, so you are trusted to do the work without anybody there. I get the key, people go on to work. This is where honesty comes in. The more honest you are, the more

> work you get. They give me the number and say if I want lunch, they will have lunch delivered to me.

The man Larry worked for began buying property all over the country, but especially in Florida, and used to send him to these locations to work. "I remember he bought property in Hollywood, Florida, and went there to work. He'd build up these properties, keep them for a few years, then sell them for big money."

Larry admits to not knowing where he gets all his energy from at his age. "I feel as good now as I did when I was 22. I work a lot and walk a lot and that must help some."

I ask if he was a union man. "I used to be in the union, but I'm not now, because this is not a union building, and because it's not a union building, I'm not in the union anymore." I want to know what he means by a union building, but before I can ask the question, he continues to talk about his friend:

> He had about 25 buildings. I was working steady with him on these various properties, but after he died, the company was sold, and you know these people changed things and they brought in their own people to do the work, and I moved on. It was at that time his brother-in-law stepped in, and then I started working for his brother-in-law, and he had four buildings and he was a good man, too. And one of those buildings was in the Bronx, and I'd worked for his brother-in-law for those years and he wanted to help me out, so he made me an offer, and had I took it at that time, and I don't know why I didn't take it, because I could have been like a rich man today cause he, well, it was at 1345 Teller Avenue in the Bronx, and he said to me, "Larry, I want you to have this building." And I was like a young man then, I musta been about 24 by then, he say, "David [the brother-in-law] wanted you to have that building on Teller."

The building offered to Larry was a thirty-family unit with two to three bedrooms per flat and a nice structure. He told him he could have it for very little money down, since the brother-in-law wanted him to have the building any way. The offer went like this:

> He said all I had to do was give him $1,300 a month pay, the taxes on the building of course, but he say the building will pay for itself. You know, you got thirty people in there, and everybody pay their rent, it's take care of itself. So he say think about it. So I come back and I say I gotta pay about $1,600 a month in total with all the other things I had to do, and I was young and I thought, maybe I can't handle all that, so I told him no. And you know to this day, I think about that offer and wish I had said yes, because he was really just giving me the building,

but I couldn't see that at the time. And I soon realized that I will never have that opportunity again. Ain't nobody gonna make you an offer like that.

Curious about his apprenticeship, I ask when he first learned how to do plumbing work. "But I was always lucky, because I had met this Jamaican guy, too, when I was first in New York, who also taught me about plumbing and electric work. All he said was for me to go around with him and he would teach me the plumbing business, and I did that for about three years."

When I ask if he lives in the six-story co-op he works in, he replies, "Ooh no, can you imagine them giving me a four-bedroom, $750,000 apartment? I don't think so."

The Housing Maintenance Code of Union 32BJ states that a super who works in a residential building of ten or more units must live either in the building or within 200 feet of the building. In Larry's case, the co-op management decided to simply have him only part-time, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, which meets the legal requirement, technically. Otherwise, it appears they would not exactly be in compliance with the code.

I ask how many nonunion supers he thinks are in Harlem, and he says he doesn't know. And for sure, the numbers are elusive. I checked the union, and they said there are 35,000 union supers, but they did not have a number for the unlicensed nonunionized supers. At this point, the exact number of supers in the city and the United States is not rightly known, but what we do know is that super work is similar to janitorial work, site maintenance work, property management work, maintenance mechanics work, and other occupations.

The local 32BJ is the union for supers in the city, and though there are thousands of workers who function as supers, the union noted only those who are actual members, who are mostly located in large apartment buildings of 75 apartments or more. The ex-official I spoke to, who did not want his name mentioned, had this to say about the supers in these unionized circumstances: "I can tell you this in all honesty, that if you belong to the union, which most supers do not, then you're talking about having the full weight of the union behind you. The union will fight for you." I asked if he meant that a super cannot be fired from the job. He cautioned and said, "Don't misunderstand me here. No, it doesn't mean that at all, but what it does mean is you would have to do something pretty egregious to be fired from one of those jobs. I mean, let's take the co-op situation or the condo situation. Condos have a board, am I right? Well, in order to fire a super, you have to have some pretty large, I mean, large amount of dirt on that super to get him fired."

I pressed him to give an example.

Well, let's say if the super was just a nasty guy. And I say "guy" because most of these supers are guys, not all, but way past vast majority. Let's say you got a nasty guy who disrespects a tenant. Now you gotta understand that the tenant in these condos are wealthy people who are essentially, if you wanna look at it, basically the owner of their place and is in that sense your boss, so you can't go around disrespecting them. Okay, let's say you don't do the necessary repairs like you should, or you don't do proper supervising of the people under you. You say you gonna get this done and you don't, or you get it done but it ain't right. Another example would be bad behavior, real bad behavior like stealing money or supplies or dealing drugs or using them. Well, these are bad things for the super to be part of, and you could get written up for those things.

I asked him what he meant by "written up."

Well, getting written up is basically where, let's say the board takes the complaints from the tenant, and every time there is a complaint about the super, they write it up like a kind of evidence log against the guy. You need to have this evidence to prove that person has or is doing what he is accused of. What that means is that you gotta show this is a situation that keeps occurring, and then they gotta send a letter of these accusations to the super himself, telling him he is violating his own signed contract that he would not do any of these things he's being accused of doing. Well, if the union feels these accusations are not justified and that the issues are not serious or feel some other reason is behind the effort to get rid of the super, they can simply say no, you can't fire this guy. That's it. They have the power to tell the board no and reinstate the guy. Remember, the super, many of them have families, so if you decide to get rid of the guy, you gotta get him and his family out of the apartment, and that's another problem.

I asked what kind of problem he was referring to exactly.

I'm talking about setting up eviction proceedings or something like that to get him out, and if he decides to fight, he has years before you can actually get him out, and in the meantime you have no super. I should also mention that the union can bring in who you might call a negotiator or mediator or arbitrator who would look at the "evidence" and feel the super is being railroaded and think the guy should get another chance. In this case, the union can recommend reinstatement, and if they do, the board has to accept that decision. Of course, they could say the opposite if the evidence is overwhelming against the guy, and in that case, they might ask the super to volunteer to leave.

I had other questions, but my time ran out and I had to end the interview.

Larry mentioned that in the co-op, each apartment could originally be purchased for $250 insider price and was now priced at $750,000. When Larry

tells me about the rich African American politicians, business men and women, and lawyers on his block and in the building he supervises, he's basically speaking about the collective presence of Black folk as a theoretical marker of demographic change and real estate investment and development in Harlem. This is another theory I might advance, the canary in the goldmine theory, as it refers to the Black presence in real estate development.

This is a sign of where development or gentrification will take place, because the presence of Blacks is usually seen as a kind of expected devaluation in terms of real estate that allows speculators to buy property cheap and repackage it at great profit. But the key question is, is this gentrification another way of codifying cyclical real estate commodification?

This is not new, since middle-class and wealthy Blacks in the first historic drive to live in Harlem bought up property, apartment buildings, and brownstones and took advantage of fleeing White owners. So one could argue that some of the first speculators in the first wave of Blacks coming to the West 134th Street area were African Americans. This form of cosmopolitan feudalism raises some other questions. What do Larry and other residents in the neighborhood feel or think about the $750,000 apartments these lawyers and business people now own? In other words, how do residents in Harlem or New York City deal with "cosmopolitan feudalism?" But let's argue, for a moment, that the land base in Harlem is owned by "insiders"; does the grinding wheel of business alter the equation because of race and ethnicity and change? The argument posed by Black cultural nationalists for ages has been that Harlem would change for the better if there were more Black landlords and ownership from within the community. How do we know this? Is there evidence of this? I don't think so, because as an owner/landlord myself, I wanted the rent money paid on time just like any landowner did, and that is a certain fact. Will a shared history and ethnic pride compel a Black landlord to allow a Black tenant to forego paying rent? The answer is no. Conversely, Gilbert Osofsky, writing about the situation of Black landlords in the 1920s, says, "For landlords—Negro and white (Negro tenants continuously complained that Negro landlords fleeced them with equal facility as whites)—Harlem became a profitable slum."[1]

Would Harlem be a different place if more Blacks owned property today? The answer will probably never be known. But my other question is, what happens with the thousands of supers who are not in the union? How are their situations resolved? Though it is an old profession, newer skills are increasingly needed by the super, including more sophisticated social skills. In the next section of the narrative, I examine what constitutes "working knowledge," buttressed by the need to see the building as a social system where people are the primary reason for being for the superintendent.

Supers and Practical (Situated) Knowledge

Supers should have cultural knowledge of the neighborhood and the people who make up the neighborhood, both the new-arriving tenants and those already occupying the building as tenants. All this helps the super become more skilled at the job, which involves both social skills (interaction) and tool knowledge. Just being a super in a building is not enough to be considered a "good" super, because one has to have the required knowledge to be both a "good" super as well as a skilled craftsman handling the day-to-day operations qua duties of super. A great deal of on-the-job training is required in order to be a good super, because it is experience "on the job" that is the most important thing, as each person must invest time to become that experienced and knowledgeable person we call the superintendent. The three most useful skills a super has to have relate to plumbing, carpentry, and electrical work, as these are triple areas of situated practical knowledge that must be learned and mastered. Sociologist Douglas Harper writes of practical (situated) knowledge as a mysterious process: "It was practical knowledge—intimately tied to the material and lacking scientific basis—that guided his hand." Harper states how smiths forged weapons and essential tools that pushed people into a new stage of premodernity:

> The knowledge embodied in this work forms a unity; whole processes controlled by a single individual. Fixing and making are but different points along a continuum. The individual who possesses these skills performs tasks that are essential to the community and has a status equal to that importance. The community, in this case a small, intimately connected group of people living close to their natural environment, relied on the smith to make several of the necessities of life—the weapons used to kill animals and protect themselves from their enemies, the utensils to cook soups and gruels in pots and meats on spits, and the tools used by the carpenter, the other great fashioner.[2]

I understand working knowledge to be the mastery over the skills required to do the job. Today, one must learn handyman skills from a family member or acquire knowledge by taking vocational training; have a high school diploma or college degree; develop people skills; acquire organizational skills; and serve as an apprentice with a super or janitor. In my own case, I wanted to work and make money for myself, and the downstairs super in the first building I lived in with my sister provided an opportunity to do so, but the initial learning came from my father, who was a local tradesman in Mississippi and taught me plumbing and electrical skills.

My father was considered a "tradesman," a man skillful at his trade. He worked many years as a plumber and electrician, and he knew a bit about carpentry as well. The knowledge he acquired and that held him in good stead his

whole life was attained while he was on the job. The on-the-job training, as it was called, was standard in many circumstances, which meant learning a trade at the knee of a master. An apprenticeship was required, and the knowledge gained constituted the basis of learned proficiency at doing something. For my father, it involved learning how to fix leaks, dig six-by-six-foot holes for septic tanks, wire a house before construction, and make measurements and multiply, add, divide, and use fractions.

Working knowledge and applied effort was also about having "common sense." Common sense is not all that common, and it is a tricky term to get your head around, particularly as a kid, since many adults were said to not have much common sense themselves. Common sense, unlike working knowledge, was not necessarily something acquired. It was like sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "taste"; as we all know, some folk have it and some folks do not. So it was with common sense: it could not necessarily be taught like working knowledge, but if you could get the skills that the working knowledge gave you and combine it with common sense, it was an invaluable amalgam.

Common sense is not just knowing something but knowing it intuitively—almost instinctively knowing what is right and what's wrong in a given situation, or knowing how a thing works or does not work. It means knowing how to fit the "elbow" into an "S" groove in the pipe or seeing how a tongue and groove fit in a floor plan and realizing that the corner spot has to be reconfigured. While working (practiced) knowledge is the first cousin to proficient knowledge, common sense is the granddaddy of wisdom. When Larry, for example, spoke of imagining beforehand how a certain job was to be done before setting foot at the site, he was describing this intuitive form of knowledge.

Another example of working, practical knowledge came from a master saddlemaker I observed at a farm in North Carolina. "The saddle is cut straight over the withers with a square-ended cantle." He explained.

He pressed down on the saddle seat and took the "girth" (the band attached to the saddle) and held it with one hand while putting the ends together tightly. He took another tool, a larger tweezer-type pair of pliers, and pulled the needle through the looped "bridge" on the top part, called the "seat," and he made a point to tell me other names for things in the craftsman vocabulary: "skirt," "head," "tree," "hind bow," "skeleton," "withers." I did not get the meaning of everything he said, but I understood the essence of it. After he completed this lesson, he went about adjusting a few things, and then the $3,200 saddle was ready.

Observing master craftsmen at work, and doing this with my own eyes (autopsically), is essential to ethnographic work, because it gives the power of the gaze primary instruction on what things are and how they look from the observer's viewpoint. But even an ethnographer with a privileged view cannot

always see everything. Though I was able to follow both the supers and the saddle man as they performed their respective jobs, it is clear that I only saw one tiny part of what they do.

The super, too, performs and utilizes practical knowledge in the daily operations needed in the building. Athena spoke about her skills in this regard:

> I have hands-on skills. I have all the skills you would hire a super for. I'm a pretty good plasterer, and I would think a very good painter. I'm very neat and detail oriented. I do general carpentry work, electrical work, plumbing repairs. I can replace an entire toilet. I can replace any particular part of the toilet that needs to be replaced. The same thing for the faucets, the kitchen sink, that sorta thing. Somebody called today, for example, and said they're having problems with their heating. The hot-water system and stuff, that might take great physical strength, but if you know how to fix it, you can. One half of the radiator was hot and the other was cold. So what do I do next? You know. So I deal with it—one, two, three, I'm out. Interestingly, a lot of people say, "Oh, it's unusual that you are a woman super," and it is, but I believe the thing that sets me apart from most of the other supers is the knowledge that I have. Not the gender.

Athena mentioned in the mechanical field that she had the privilege of working with talented men who were not "hacks" or "weekend plumbers" but men like her father who excelled in the craftsmanship needed to do the job.

> These guys that I worked with were machinists. These were not people who drilled a hole and shoved a screw to fit it in. These were men who "miked it up" [used a micrometer, a device for measuring small distances, especially based on the rotation of a finely threaded screw], drilled a hole, and tapped it. Not only did they tap it, but they knew the difference between a run tap, a starting tap, and a finishing tap. They take out their micrometer, and when you use the micrometer, it's because you got to know the exact thickness to the thousands of a second to the ten thousandth of what size hole one has to drill. If this is the rod or this is the screw, then now I know this is the one without any doubt. All those nuances, well, you might say that's knowledge that the average super does not have. It is very rare that I come across somebody that knows the extent of tools, how to use them, that I know.

Athena's work routine is noteworthy in part because she is capable of performing those skills that fall into the three most common forms of practical knowledge useful to the trade.

Plumbing, Electricity, and Carpentry

To do the tasks necessary for plumbing is to work properly in lead (Latin *plumbum*), which now embraces all work not only in lead but also in tin, zinc, other metals, and increasingly plastics, all of which is connected with the installation, fitting, repairing, welding, and soldering of pipes for water, gas, drainage, cisterns, roofs, sinks, and the like in any building—the general work of the plumber. Every super has knowledge of plumbing from the smallest operation such as fixing a leaking faucet to utilizing the snake in the toilet bowl. All supers have this rudimentary know-how (or should) in order to do the work of the super.

The second knowledgeable skill is electrical mastery. *Electricity* denotes "the physical agency which exhibits itself by effect of attraction and repulsion when particular substances are rubbed or heated, also in certain chemical and physiological actions and in connection with moving magnets and metallic circuits."[3] The term is derived from the word *electrica*, first used by William Gilbert (1544–1603) in his epoch-making treatise *De magnete magneticisque corporibus et de magno magnete tellure*, published in 1600, to denote substances that possess a similar property to amber of attracting light objects when rubbed. The phenomenon came to be collectively referred to as "electrical," a term first used by William Barlowe, the Archdeacon of Salisbury, in 1618 in the study of electrical science.

One of the more valuable skills in the trade is the art of carpentry (from the Latin *carpentum*, for "carriage"), where work is done in wood, especially for building purposes. It is the skill least used by the super, but a rudimentary understanding of how to repair or construct a bookshelf, cabinet, floorboard, or other common areas is expected of the super or his handymen. A tenant recalled one super's helper: "Juan is the most reliable handyman we had. He could do anything, and woodworking was his specialty. When he had to put a partition in the apartment above, he was instructed by the landlord to make two rooms from the one." The partition that Juan had to install in this case was basically a screen used to divide large floor spaces into smaller rooms, which are sometimes constructed to carry the floors above by a system of trussing. They are built of various materials: those in use now are common stud partitions, bricknogged partitions, solid deal and hardwood partitions, 4½-inch brick walls (or bricks laid on their sides, making a 3 inch partition), and various patent partitions such as coke breeze concrete or hollow brick partitions, iron and wire partitions, and plaster slab partitions. The tenant went on to say, "And for a job that would take three men a week to complete, he did it in three days, top to bottom, without any help."

Tolton

In this section of the narrative, I begin a close examination of life in the building, viewing it as much a social construction as a working space. I start with Tolton, a carpenter by trade who now works as a super in a twenty-story building on 123rd Street in Central Harlem but also works in the neighborhood at several other buildings. I go over to meet him and notice he's standing in the doorway of his building. I motion for him to meet me down on the street, and once there, he says it's best if we go into a back entrance to the basement. He opens the door and leads me down a clean hallway and a flight of stairs into a watery basement. He explains that the leaking water will soon be mopped up. I see many tools and ask him if there was one tool a super needs more than any other. He holds up his hands and smiles, and I add, "Besides your hands."

"A channel lock," He says quickly.

> If you look here, I show you something. Closely you will see one part of the lock has a wrench, but it can adjust to different sizes, and it's the greatest thing to walk with. When you a super, you are also a neighborly man. What that means is people who might not be from your building will see you and want you to do some work for them. So this one tool, I always walk with, and I know people will always ask me to do something. When I put the channel lock in my pocket and a little clip on here [he indicates near his waist] and I leave to walk around, the people will start to ask me a lots of questions. Once this rule is on my hip here and the channel lock behind my back here, people will ask me a whole bunch of questions. Do I know how to do this thing or do that thing? Can I fix this thing or that? They ask me, and I tell you anything you need to get things done, you can do with it. Once I come out here dressed like this, I be getting a lot of questions. "Yo, can you do this or that?" A super always busy, you know, until he can't run away from it. [laughs]

Other supers had other favorite tools they used. Allan, for instance, specifies both a Leatherman multitool and a pair of pliers. "These are always in my pocket. So you can use that [he points to the Leatherman] if you need to screw things or take something apart. These I've used ever since my first management job, and since then I always have a Leatherman and a screwdriver in my back pocket. Because no matter what happens, if you have these two things with you and you go someplace, you don't have to run back to get a tool, because these two will do most of the things you need to do." At this point, Allan walks over to the side of wall in the basement and picks up the Leatherman and shows it to me. It has a file, saw, plier, knife, and in all about twenty different tools in one. "I never leave home without it," he says.

When I inquired of the various supers in the city and asked what tool they carry with them on their daily rounds, while all the men said they prefer a specific hand-held tool, a gadget, if you will, to perform their task, Athena had the most perceptive answer:

> Let me say this to you, and it might sound obnoxious, but the most important tool I take with me is my knowledge. It really is. Now don't misunderstand me, there are things that I don't know. But it really is my knowledge. It is because it's really hard to put one over on me. The only tool I actually have in my pocket that I walk around with is my folding mike [micrometer]. It's probably the only tool I actually regularly walk around with. I mean, there isn't really just one tool, and just like my father, I don't believe in just one tool. When I see a guy walking around with his channel locks in his pocket, I just shake my head. I rarely use a channel lock, because they have those teeth that you have to bite and scratch, you know . . . Why would I use channel locks when I have a traps wrench, monkey wrenches, I have a parallel . . . I have thirty tools that I can use that won't scratch the pipe. Why the heck would I take that channel lock because it happens to fit in my pocket? No. I wanna work in a building where I have my shop and I have my tools laid out and I have the knowledge to know this is the right tool for the job.

Defining Work

Besides having to do most of the physical work themselves, supers are required (depending on the size of the building) to perform various duties, and not all supers operate around the same schedules. The roles vary. Kelly as part owner only worked with the assistance of others, while Sharif supervised others but did some of the specialized work himself. East Harlem supers Allan and Frank and west-side super-super Larry, on the other hand, were "one-man operations," and Flynn and Tolton often freelanced doing side hustling at other buildings. Craig is his own man as a porter in a building uptown with downtown church duties. The hours varied as well. Sharif worked from 7:00 to 7:00, and Craig worked from 5:00 AM to 3:00 PM. Depending on the day and the season, Larry was part-time at one building but a full-time worker because of his attending to his brownstones along the block. In summer, they all worked longer hours, and they "knocked off" earlier in winter and fall.

In all cases, the basic super arrangements are a rent-free apartment, a salary, and some health-care plan or at least insurance of some kind, and for this they are required to fire the furnace and provide hot water and heat to all tenants, remove tenants' garbage daily, make minor repairs and get major repairs done utilizing licensed workers, and keep the grounds free of snow in winter and well-kept at all other times. In all instances, responsibility for the safety of the tenants in the building is tantamount. Kelly tells the story of the early years of

her involvement in her building, which is a nondescript structure sitting near a cluster of newly gentrified stores, shops, restaurants, and bars:

> Well, number one, I hated getting down there at 6:30 or 7:00 in the morning to deal with the boiler or even in the middle of the night. There would be times when we would realize at two in the morning that the boiler was down and waking up to no hot water. And doing that to the tenants, I always felt horrible when there was no hot water. With our old boiler, we virtually never [used to] have hot water, so for about twenty years, we lived with that periodic boiler down. I will tell a story about the time in the early days when somebody reached in to unclog a drain in the basement and there was a dead cat in the drain. I was not present for that [laughs], but there have been adventures with rodents in the building. So the one time there was a rat in the building of course was when my son was a baby. There was a rat in my apartment; he must have smelled a baby. But its great now, I mean, the building has arrived. There are still details in the hall that are unfinished. We need to remove that plaster from one wall in the entry hall and need to finish around the windows; we need to replace the hallway windows, in the next year or two. There's a little something wrong with the floor when you enter the building that I wanna do. We should replace the marble steps in the vestibule. But it's really, it's kind of tweaking things, you know, just aesthetic improvements.

One of the major tasks in super work is just maintaining the building, and Kelly explains how this is accomplished when several people are involved:

> My boyfriend [Peter] is an electrician by trade. He actually did a lot of the rewiring for a fee. He was hired to do a lot of the rewiring. He is from Switzerland, so very well-trained, but not licensed, so we would sometimes have licensed people come in and sign off. A couple of us could do small plumbing, you know, change a washer, and to this day that's true. One tenant in the building is good at little handyman stuff . . . so back to the original five of us. We had a company that we like to help with doors, they renovated our front door, and construction would always be small contractors. We have a local guy that now we are using for painting who we really like, and he actually just laid a floor in one apartment. That's a first for us to redo, other than the owners' apartments. We redid our first floor, which is kind of cool.

The super is, at this stage in the process, a manager and supervisor of various assorted workers, helpers, and porters in the business of doing the work the building requires.

> Neither [Peter] nor I do that much hands-on stuff now, because the building is in good condition. Our friend Ayal, who lives in the building and has handyman skills, does some of the work, but I'm actually, technically, or am officially the

> managing agent. So I will officially hire Ayal to do a small thing like plumbing. Peter can, you know, also tend to do something small, but does not do so much of that nowadays because he's more busy with other things and we don't have so much of the little stuff. But for example, Peter and I, for twenty years, would deal with the boiler. Our old boiler would conk out on a regular basis, so Peter and I personally would go down there at 6:30 in the morning and try to get it going again. But now with the new boiler, we never have any boiler issues. So yeah, um, it's kind of smooth sailing and just the occasional little thing or hiring someone to paint.

For Tolton in Central Harlem, work is nonstop, and he does not see himself having what can be described as an average workday in his buildings:

> We supers' workday never ends, because we are on call 24 hours a day. If a flood is happening in somebody's place, we have to go there no matter what time it is. So do you understand, even though it has no end in terms of the workday, you have to make it end. You understand? Within the office, you see a sign that says 8 to 4, but really if an emergency come, you got to go, and really you don't really know what's a busy day. A busy day could come Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Any day could be a busy day. It doesn't say this day or that. Because you have to watch, it's family, family structure, and every family have things going on at each and every apartment. So you might get a leak in this one and drain blockage in that one; plus the entire building you have to maintain, too. Some jobs hold you for some time and another job come in when you still with this one, and there might be friction between them tenants who say, "Why you over there when I need you over here?"

Supers, or those who are members of the super staff (when there is a staff), have to perform at least the following specific activities: pull the garbage, take care of the boiler, attend to emergency matters, collect rent, and protect tenants. Not all supers do the same kind of work, and the porters and handymen who assist the supers do perhaps the bulk of the manual labor. Supers, however, do have a job description, though it has a clause that allows landlords wiggle room to avoid a super saying, "Oh, that's not in my job description." The clause basically states the super should be available at all times in case of emergencies, but many supers when asked to perform work outside of those descriptions can demand additional pay. He might paint a specific apartment, as Tolton noted, if asked by a tenant to do so, or set up track lighting, or help a tenant move out. And in those situations, which are not part of the job, supers will ask for money to perform these tasks. One super, who wished to remain anonymous, told me,

> I'll tell a tenant it will cost her twenty dollars for me to fix a light switch, but I'll only ask the tenants I know can afford to pay. I wouldn't do that to any old couple on a pension. But if I'm asked to do a job that I think is too much work outside of what I'm supposed to do, like plaster a big room, well, in this work you must remove the old plaster before slapping on the new with a trowel. The old plaster has to be mixed with lime and water, and not too hard and not too soft must be the mixture. The place has paint peeling from the ceiling, the whole room has to be repainted and decorated, dust, powder, the air is heavy, the banging sound of trowels against scraping walls, noisy, the buckets filled with water, lime and plaster . . . not too much water. The place has the smell of work, but that's not necessarily supers' work. Well, I gotta charge people extra for that kinda work.

Whether this last statement is true of most supers is hard to know, but I do know some supers depend on such tipping to keep their income at a certain level, while others do work outside. Tolton explains, "I can tell you this with my job here. I can guarantee you this. If I need to make more money, right? I can create ways to make more money. But I'm a man, not a machine. For example, how do I create more ways to make more money? Ever see someone move out? I see they need to paint the apartment. Well, that's my money. And that's different from the money I make as super in my buildings. So whatever I do in that apartment, that's my money."

Different supers have a variety of ways to hustle and make extra money. Flynn says he makes extra money by being loyal to the tenants who repay him by tipping him well when he does something for them.

> And keep in mind, this is also another way how I make my money. You know what I mean? This extra money. Because between the super and the contractor will give you extra amount of dollars a week and then everything else is extra. And that extra amount of dollars a week, let's say, you are responsible for changing a washer, or fixing a leak, or installing four or five tiles. And just for those extra four or five tiles, I would have to send an invoice. And they would pay me extra bucks for that. And in the other neighborhood I worked at, the money was amazing working there. The money was the best I've ever made as a super. I used to install gates for him [the owner], outside gates, that was a ten thousand dollar job. Stuff like that made me comfortable, and that kept me there. You know. But after a while, the negative started to work against the positive situation, and I felt I had to get out, because what good is money when you're dead? You know what I mean?

In our highly technological society, increasingly new knowledge is required, and most companies hire people with Bachelor of Arts or Science degrees rather than high school graduates. As jobs become more technological, the job the

super does harks back to a time when "handyman" meant just that: a man who was good with his hands. It meant a man like my father, or Larry, or Tolton, or any of the supers mentioned here who learned how to plumb, wire a house, and do carpentry by following around a handyman. These skills are still relevant, important, and useful, but fewer of our young people know how to do them.

In many professions, a license is required in order to qualify for the job, but in the case of the super job, a license is required but not many supers in poor neighborhoods have one. The license is legally required but not necessary—only the skills to do the work are necessary. Historically, licensing and testing is considered a positive form of regulation. "Dentists, doctors, lawyers, fortune tellers, and frog farmers are now licensed occupations in either all or some of the United States. The reasons given for the growth and benefit of this form of regulation usually include the idea that existence of licenses may minimize consumer uncertainty over the quality of the license service and increase the overall demand for the service."[4]

But at the same time, it can be viewed as a major obstacle and deterrent, a kind of discriminatory device to keep minority groups from entering certain high-paying jobs. When my brother and I tried to join the steel workers union back in the 1970s, we were told we had to take certain tests. We passed those tests and were some of the first Blacks in the city to join the Riggers or Iron Workers Union. But we also saw Italian boys who spoke no English getting work while we sat in the hiring halls, and we knew they had not passed any test to get there.[5] "Modern licensing laws regulate professionals as well as unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. As of 2000, roughly twenty percent of the nation's workforce was licensed."[6] Sociologist George Friedman states, "The craftsman—apart from the classical occupations of tool-setting, repair and maintenance work—retains his place in all sectors where complexity of work and variations in demand require a peculiarly flexible type of skilled laborer, an all-around man."[7] Peter Bearman also notes, "From little problems such as broken doorknobs, rattling radiators, and (for those with high ceilings) spent light bulbs, the first line of responsibility lies with the super, who either directly repairs what he can or determines the priority order for the handyman."[8] Other examples of this phenomenon can be found in the airline industry, saddle-making industry, fast food industry, or slaughter houses.[9]

But there are other tasks only master craftsmen can perform, and they are called in to do these specific tasks, such as electrical or heavy duty construction related to plumbing. Sharif, the super in the co-op building, confirms this as he discusses his average workday:

> I realize the need to have special craftsmen, and it is in fact required by the law to have electricians, plumbers, and construction crews come in to do certain kinds

of heavy duty work. But keep in mind, a typical day I wake up around 7:30, though I'm not an early riser and I don't like getting up early, but that's besides the point; I get up and go talk to the doorman, Raul. He's the five-day morning doorman. I check the boiler, the thermostat, I go to the roof and check the water tower. I have a list I get from Raul that tenants give him about the things that they want done. But in the morning, I say hi to Raul and whatever, and he says to me, "Boss, I'm sorry, but we have some work to do today."

He shows me a list of supplies: "4 buckets of compound, 4 bags 50 pounds, 3 bags of lime, Kohler shower body (4-way), two length of 2 × 4, 2 sheets waterproof Sheetrock 5/8th, 4 boxes of 3 × 6 tile, new toilet, 1 gallon of tile glue, 2 boxes of 5 lbs grout, 24 moulding tiles, cylinder screw, new locks on front door, left-handone."

Sharif laughs and says,

Some days there may not be a lot of work, but then people come home from work and they say, "Oh, I forgot to leave a note for you, blah, blah." Now these notes are left with the doorman, and we have a board in the basement where some people go down there and I have a dry-erase marker and people write the nature of their problem and apartment number. They might leave me a note when they go do laundry, let's say. Some tenants leave very casual notes, and some leave more details in the notes they leave. I should say to you that some supers have work order sheets, but I don't. Some supers have those sheets, but we are not that structured like in the military. Now those sheets you have to sign, and if you have a handyman, he has to sign and submit it to management. We just have simple notes sometimes on napkins or a piece of paper with the nature of the problem, you know. Sometimes people have more specific requests, and they leave their phone/cell phone number and things like that so I can call them and consult before I do anything.

Some people wait for me and ask if I have time to perform certain jobs their way. For example, I had a tenant who wanted a mirror hung a certain way, or they just bought a very expensive chandelier on their trip from France and they want to be there to see if it's hung perfectly without any flaws. They want it installed perfectly the way they want it installed. And that it stays up at a certain angle, what have you.

I ask Sharif what happens after the morning duties are done.

As far as lunch is concerned, I'm very casual about this. Some supers have to have lunch at noon and that's it. But for me, I don't care about the time so much. Sometimes I skip lunch because I want to finish my day. So I skip lunch or I take a late lunch and I tell the doorman if when my day is over that if anyone wants me, don't call me unless he sees the fire truck coming. All I'm saying is that I don't

> do my work in any particular order. But the main things I do so people won't get upset if I forget to order oil for the boiler, let's say. So I check the oil levels and thermostat and all of that because people do get very upset if there is no heat or hot water. And God forbid if there are any leaks, because there are a lot of pipes around the boiler room and storage room area. So it's kind of important to have those running in good order. I go to the roof every day or almost every day. I can't say I go every day, because I don't have time, but almost every day to check the water tower.

In addition to the water tank, the penthouse apartment has plants, and when making his rounds, the super goes and sees if everything is in order. He visually inspects the premises. "My building has these co-ops and penthouses that are owned by one family. The penthouse . . . used to be two [apartments], and they bought the other one and combined them."

I might add that most of the buildings in this neighborhood have penthouses. There are usually one or two penthouses per building, and as you walk around, you can see the beautiful roof gardens and green spaces atop those buildings.

"You can see them, most have gardens or terraces with lots of plants and stuff. Some people like to have plants and so on, and they like a garden, and most have a gardener to maintain it. All I do is check the drains and that's all I kinda do." What Sharif does after lunch time depends on the number of requests he has from tenants, the "notes" he receives during the day. "But of course this is not every day; I want to be as honest as I can. But some days I take care of all repairs as much as I can, and other days I can only get to do so much and that's it. I do it the next day. Sometimes I will do repairs after the leaks, for instance, or the riser breaks and the walls and ceilings need repairing, I'll do those things. I replaster to fix these affected areas, and sometimes I even paint depending on the relationship with the resident, let's say."

Co-op rules state that supers do not have to paint, especially using nonwhite paint. If tenants want other colors, they usually pay what one super refers to as "side hustling" and Sharif calls "hustle money." In case of the co-op, according to Sharif, they do not paint at all.

> After damages to the apartment, we are responsible for fixing walls, ceiling, floor, you know. But I might add they don't paint. The management or building or the co-op is not responsible to paint. They will break the wall, fix the wall, but they don't paint. The resident is responsible for painting the wall. This is a contractual thing between the co-op and the resident. Mostly all the people I talk to, they say the same thing about the rules. The logic behind this is that most people have different colors, and some people have custom colors, and it becomes very difficult for management to match the paint. So it's kinda known in advance we manage

> to do our best to bring it back to its original state, but we don't paint. You need, I mean, the resident needs to hire someone on their own to do this painting. But people will hire me to do it. They say, "Oh, I'll pay you some money to do this wall." So this may take a day for me to do this work. In some cases, it takes a couple of days, depending on the job that's needed. I used to spend weeks and weeks just repairing damaged walls and ceilings. That might mean cementing it first, then putting more plaster and then compound, and then sand it lightly, then prime and paint.

The nonrequirement for supers to paint in colors goes beyond co-op tenants and extends to all tenants in apartments in the city. Landlords are not required by law to paint in colors. Sharif continues:

> Well, landlords don't paint in colors because it's very simple to buy one color and keep it like that, because the law only requires that you paint the apartment, not that you have to paint it in certain colors. You are required to paint the apartment, that's it; to keep it habitable, that's it; to keep the common areas clean, and so the landlord only uses white and off-white, and the logic behind this is that it is very easy to store and maintain this one basic white color without getting into all the various color schemes you can imagine people be coming up with. So for repairs and touch ups, for instance, you only have linen white or off-white, white, and that's it. For landlords, they are responsible to paint, and they cannot say, "Oh, I can't paint."

In some cases, the super becomes a person who increasingly has to work with others, either as supervisor or as kindred professional, including other tradesmen, contractors, electricians, or auxiliary roles such as exterminators, painters, and plasterers, to say nothing of those professional landlords they might inherit as buyers of the buildings they happen to be the super of. Such landlords may be lawyers, doctors, engineers, actors, or professors, to name only a few. The super has to have a modicum of social interactional skills in order to deal with these contingencies and various types of possible individuals.

The modern-day super profession dates back to the 1800s, when the landlord's representative would be in charge of cleaning outhouses from the back of tenements. The role was more formally established later when tenants and the apartment building emerged around the 1860s in New York City. The super has to have licenses to perform certain work or at least the training to do the work. Craig, for example, is not licensed in the skills set necessary to be a super, but he has all the right skills to do the job. Licensing is required for some craftsmen, though not for every super. If the super or handymen use electric welding equipment, no license is required, but if they use cutting torches, they need a certificate of fitness from the fire department.

Electrical work, no matter how small the job, always requires by law or code a licensed electrician to do the work, but seldom is this done in most poor neighborhoods. Taking care of the building is part of what the super does as routine. In comparison, sociologist Harry Wolcott in his book about a high school principal echoes this same sentiment: "The operation and maintenance of a school as a physical plant makes unseen demands on a principal. At best, routines and procedures may be established which free the principal from having to attend to heat, lights, locking doors, fixing windows, collecting paper, and so forth. Such carefree days require, however, that experienced personnel are available to handle routines and that no unanticipated problems arise. Let the routine vary in the slightest and the office and the principal hear about it immediately."[10] This passage parallels the super, who has to take care of the building and respond to any and all problems that may arise in the building. This chapter explored one facet of the super's life and observed the super doing basic and not so basic duty. Not all supers' work ethic matches Larry's zeal for the job, but Kelly, the South Harlem super, states flatly, "I feel nothing gets done around here without the help of other craftsmen besides myself."

CHAPTER 5

The Super and Informal Encounters

I see the super as a mediator or buffer between the tenants and the landlord, and that engages certain kinds of people skills. Yet we have situations where some tenants like the super and some tenants do not. The same is true of the supers, who might like some tenants and not others. Flynn expressed his opinions about tenants and the particular role he plays in the building:

> In this building, I would say it is not so much of a dislike for me. I would say more of a . . . Well, first of all this is a co-op, and things are a little bit different than a rental, because in a co-op, everybody owns their apartment. And in the co-op, there is a board, and everything goes through the board. In other words, if you want to buy an apartment in the building, the board has to interview you, and they make the decision whether to let you buy the place or not. If they say no, then you won't be able to buy it. A residential building is different. By the way, I was super in a residential building in Brooklyn. And when I was there, the tenants didn't like the owner, but they loved me, because I'm the type of super that when a tenants calls me to say this or that is wrong in their apartment, I'm the type of super guy who would call the owner and tell him this tenant or that needed this repair or that done. I would call him and let him know what the tenants needed, and the tenants thought that was a good thing, that I was on their side, and that made me loved and respected in the building.

What encounters do supers face with people living in the buildings? Flynn talked about an incident that occurred in his building that was more than a normal or everyday happening:

> You see, when I got to the building I told you about, there was another super there. His name was Sal, and the landlord split the basement into two parts. One part that he split the basement into, he rented out to his old super, Sal, who became his contractor. And he rented the other half to another guy, and that other guy's side, he used to have poker games, domino games, some kind of card games.

These were mostly gambling games, whether they were playing cards or whatever. I went down there one night and they had one table over here with four guys, another table over there with two, another one with four guys, and I'm at this table here. There must have been about 20 guys in the place. Maybe a few more, 20 to 25 people. You had a coupla guys standing around watching, but everybody else is gambling. All of a sudden, these two guys sitting over there [points] start arguing. They arguing because of a woman. And they are both talking shit to each other, and the one guy says something about the other guy is fucking this chick or his chick. And all of a sudden, one of the guys pulls out a gun, and we're like not too far away . . . they were even closer to one another than we are here. And the table is like, the table was like this [he arranges the table and chairs with his hand gestures]. There is one guy sitting here and another sitting, like, there, and the guy takes the gun out and pop, pop, shoots the guy right in the chest. Everybody in the place froze. Because the gun went off like tat, tat. He shot the guy and the guy just went like this [he gestures, showing the way the man slumped over]. And he's still cursing the guy out. "You motherfucker, blah, blah, blah." And slowly everybody got up and disappeared. I went up to my apartment, and about half hour, 45 minutes, somebody knocks on the door. Police. Detectives.

Police: You the super in the building?
Super: Yes.
Police: Did you know there was a shooting in the building?
Super: No. I did not.
Police: There was a shooting in your basement.
Super: What do you mean? Well, one part of the basement is mine and the other part is rented to someone else.

So that's when I said I had to get out of there. I knew I was a witness to a murder really, but I felt I better not say nothing, blah, blah, blah. But the guy did the shooting I saw one day, and he looked at me, like with a "don't you say nothing, motherfucker" look. But I never saw him again, but stuff like that traumatizes you. That screwed me up. I tell you after that, you have one of those dreams about it. I had dreams about that, and in the dream, I am the guy he shot. You know what I mean? And I wake up and I'm sweating, and sweating and . . . aah, like shit, man. That was a terrible worse experience. And that happened before those other two incidents I told you about, the man thrown from the roof and guy killing the momma's boyfriend. And that last shooting was it for me. That was definitely the last straw.

When I asked each super to tell a story that resonated with them, I got some unexpected responses, as each super from the various neighborhoods revealed something relevant to the larger narrative involving tenants and supers. We are all aware of how desirable it is to have a profession. As a matter of fact, it is

perhaps the most sought-after status every American and new-arriving immigrant wants to attain. Yet, and through it all, the person cleaning our hallways, fixing our clogged drains, painting our apartments, pulling our trash, and generally servicing all our needs is first and foremost, lest we forget, a human being. However, some supers wish to bridge the gap or close the gap between themselves and tenants by more intimate means. Take, for example, the case of Flynn, whose exploits reveal the sexual side of the super–tenant relationship.

Flynn

The super's apartment is usually located in the basement, and this one is no exception, but it has an unusually large library of mostly paperback books stacked haphazardly in makeshift bookshelves along the walls and leading up to the super's place. Inside his flat, a large brownish gray leather sofa is in the center of the space, and you sink down as you sit. A large brown-and-white-colored pit bull is caged and tied up in the corner behind the table where Flynn sits facing me. The room has an exercise machine, which does not appear too often used, since it's covered with objects. To the left is a big fish tank, an even larger television with a foreign basketball game playing, a piano, a high CD holder in one corner, and nine hardcover Stephen King books lining a high shelf, with pictures of relatives displayed underneath on the wall. The table is a marbleized block of a tree trunk. Overall the place is pleasant, not stuffy, despite the dog cage in the corner. The dog did not bark or move around, but on occasion, his tail wagged when the super moved or adjusted his seating position.

Flynn, 38 years old, lives alone in a co-op building. His family is from Europe. "I was born in 1976 in New York," he begins, but he says his country

> is an ancient kingdom in the Balkan Peninsula, you know, in the southern European area in Northern Greece and southwest of Bulgaria. If you go there, you have the Black Sea on one side, the Ionian Sea and the Adriatic Sea on the other. When I was old enough to understand what a job was, one of my dad's first jobs was as a super. And you could say that's where I got it from, because I learned the super's trade from him. I was seven or eight years old, I started going into people's apartments and fixing things with my dad—leaks, putting in washers, and things like that—and when I first go there, they couldn't believe it, and they would say, "Hey, kid, you're too young to come into my house to fix my sink," but I'd tell them I know what I'm doing. But after a while, my dad wasn't even there, because he had a day job to do, and since he wouldn't be there in the daytime, any complaints that were coming from people, like change a washer, or change a toilet seat, I'd do that job. I was all but nine or ten after a few years of doing this work with my dad. But of course, this was after school that I did these things, because as far as Dad was concerned, these was my chores, but I still had to go to school.

I didn't take classes or anything to learn these things, to develop these skills. I learned from my father. I learned by watching. I'd see how it was done and then I would do it. That's how I learned the skills that I have, which is plumbing, electrical, carpentry, masonry, roofing, complete interior renovations. Anything that has to do with fixing things in a building, that's my field. But I started out not as super but a super's helper, you might say, and my first real job besides super was as a general contractor.

He has a believable Jamaican accent, which he recalls at will as he tells his next story:

Well, I'm single. And I used to work in Brooklyn, and a lot of the women in the building I worked in were single also. I would say 80 percent of the women in the building were single. And I would be going to their apartment, and Jamaican women, they are flirty, man, you know what I mean? One time this lady comes up to me, and she was about forty, but beautiful and strong. Strong. Jamaican women are strong. And she came out there with a negligee, nothing underneath. And I'm coming to fix something. Mind you, she's got a son who's bigger than me—he's a drug dealer and gun runner. He's a bad guy. I'm thinking about her son coming in, but she says he's out and says in her Jamaican accent, "Mon, whut you scared a woman now? I'm divorced now, you know?"

So anyway, I say let's go to the bedroom. She say no, "Let's do it right here." We're in the kitchen area. I say no, let's go in there, because it's better over there, so let's do that now. So we're in the process of doing whatever and I hear the door, and it's her son coming in.

I stop and go under the sink again and the mom rushes to the bedroom. It was good we stayed in the kitchen, because if we had not, we would have been busted for sure. But you know, you thank God, because when you're a super, he [the son] don't think nothing like I could possibly be fucking his mother; he's coming here to fix the sink or what-have-you. But you know, she was not the only one, but you know you can't play in public like that, you know, you got to keep it on the down low. You know what I mean? Same thing here [his present building]. I got two outta this one, so far.

As he says this, his lips curl into a slight smile, and he moves closer to the low table. The dog in the cage behind him hits his tail against the floor bedding and looks straight at me, but does not bark. Flynn reaches for a cigarette and oddly asks permission to smoke. I realize he is being polite. As he reaches for the cigarette pack, I notice he's slightly overweight, but then, as he takes a drag from the now lit tobacco, his girth fits his personality.

I start getting texted at night for me to come upstairs, and I have to go up there with a screwdriver and a pair of priers just to make it look like I'm going to work.

But that's a perk. You know what I mean? Stuff like that is awesome. One of them [women] kind of jumped on me. I was sitting there talking to her one day, and at the time she was going through a divorce, and I'm talking to her and talking to her and at the end of the conversation, I had to leave. You know, the usual good-bye moves. I hugged her, gave her a slight kiss on the cheek, you know, but she held on to me and kissed me on my neck, and I kissed her back and boom. That was it. She opened up and it was like that . . . a big bush . . . bush . . . she had a bush like oh my God. Huge, full, and so big, so I told her let me shave it. That's what I do. I trim things up. I'm the super, that's what I am, the super. I do all the body work. Everything. You know, so those are the little perks of the super. And then I had another one that scared me.

Well, we started the same way, hanging out. You know, "You wanna come up sometime?" You know, like that. "You wanna hang out?" So I say to myself, this one's ready. So I go up there to see her, and after a coupla months, she wants to get serious. So she says to me one night, "Hey, Flynn, what is this we're doing?" So I tell her we're having fun, and she says "So what's gonna happen to me?" Well, I guess she wanted this thing to get serious, but I didn't want that, you know, I wanted to keep it like it was, but she started saying stuff like "Ooh, you're not my friend, you just wanna have fun" and blah, blah, blah.

And so I just said, "Listen, let's not do this anymore," and then I left. She came down to my apartment one night at 1:00 in the morning, ringing my bell. Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring. So I say, "What's going on?" and she wants to know why I'm not answering the door. So I just said to her right then and there, "Listen, let's stop this and be professional, because you're not doing it right." It's like we're gonna play or not, you know what I mean? And that was it for that one. But every other situation I've had was amazing, awesome.

I mentioned how vulnerable supers are because they live in the building and are kind of captive, and as he talks, I think out loud about certain types of women getting attached. "Well, listen, they all, kind of, get attached, you know what I mean? Because, how do I put it? I'm sort of an oral doctor." He says this with a serious look, and I smile at the insinuation. He waits for a moment, then says,

My skills are very good. And I'm not bragging or nothing, but when I put it on 'em, it's over. I don't know what it is, but a lot of men don't perform, what is the word I'm looking for? Fellatio? Head? A lot of men don't even like to do it, and if they do it, they do it half-assed or not at all. A lot of men are turned off by it, so when I do that, they are gone, they are hooked on. I had a friend of mine who was a lesbian, and I used to kid around with her and told her one day, I said, "If I sucked you off, you won't be a lesbian no more." She laughed and thought it was a challenge. So she said, "You crazy. You crazy." "So let's go in my bedroom right now. And if I turn you out—if I did it better than your girlfriend did it, you gotta

> become regular again." So she said, "All right, cool." Her name was Joy. She was a Black chick. Right after that, she says, "You know, what I got to do is find me a White boy." I guess were getting off the subject here a little bit.

The building he has lived in and supervised for the past five years is a nice middle-income structure in a well-kept neighborhood with a large park at the end of a pleasant street. It is a two-way street with doormen at most of the other buildings, and it is near a terrace street that runs up a hill.

Flynn is unmarried and available for flirtatious encounters with tenants, but for the married supers, this is not behavior considered appropriate, and no one else talked about such amorous activities. While a super may be tempted to engage in acts such as those in which Flynn involved himself, he or she certainly would not admit to it because of the risk to not only his or her marriage but the job itself. It does not take a genius to see how the situation could easily get out of hand and lead to problems. One problem became obvious during the talk with Flynn: the tenant knows where you live. This is a problem if a jilted lover wants to make trouble.

Yet Flynn's talk has the virtue of being honest. Other issues involving tenants and supers revolve around the difficulty of dealing with tenants in both a rent-stabilized and condominium or cooperative building. Flynn did not appear to have much respect for some of the tenants in his building—perhaps it was the 5 percent Allan spoke of earlier. In the following extended excerpt from Sharif, a different set of circumstances present themselves as he tells about his evolving co-ops and tenant–super relations in the building he supervises in South Harlem.

> There are plenty, maybe not stories, but situations, but obviously people have many stories to tell. Now these things may not be that interesting but nevertheless stuff to talk about. On a personal note, I told you before I'm not a very interesting character, just a plain boring guy trying to make a living. But being super, you meet people, because you have to deal with people in the building that you're working in. You can't avoid that. So when I got the job and I was younger and even though I was physical, I probably learned as much then as I know now. But our building is not fully co-op, because some people have rent-stabilized leases, and those are the people that nobody wants.

What Sharif means is that those tenants are not well liked by what he refers to as "the establishment," or the regular tenants who own. And the reason for that is those tenants pay what they paid many years ago.

> In this case, or the case of our building, some people had the old leases, and those are the rent-stabilized and rent-controlled apartments. And these people or tenants didn't leave when the building went co-op, and you can't kick them out, so whoever owned the building or bought the building bought these particular units as well. And again, I'm trying to be diplomatic here, but they [rent-stabilized tenants] usually are not well liked, because they pay so little, and the co-op owning tenants feel that they are actually carrying them in the sense that the maintenance they pay is three times the amount these rent-stabilized people pay. You see what I mean? The rent they pay is like from 25 years ago, and the rent has skyrocketed since then, and these people are paying what they paid in the 1970s. So the situation creates some kind of resentment between these two groups. A little bit of friction between the tenants and those who manage the building.

For Sharif, his relationship is different in regard to the rent-stabilized and rent-controlled tenants, in part because he's the super to everyone. He tries to be diplomatic because, for example, he has to purchase parts and supplies he needs to fix things, and sometimes the landlord is reluctant to do this because management wants to make tenants in the stabilized apartments unhappy by not attending to their needs as promptly as others in co-op apartments. This is done to force these tenants out so management can bring these rents up to market value.

Sharif continues:

> There were a coupla people who were very unhappy with their position as renters, and now they, I mean, I don't know the history beyond the point where I took over the job of super responsibilities, but this one particular apartment had problems, and this tenant took the co-op to court. They [the co-op] had done everything it could to please her because the court had ruled in her favor. And she disliked me at the beginning. But I tried to prove to her and everybody else that I was a fair guy, that I was trying to be as true to my character as I could. Although, this behavior or character of mine has not brought me any fame or fortune or luck, but nevertheless, that's who I am. Though it took years, and that particular person that I'm kinda in the middle of the war or disputes with, we get along just fine now.

Sharif admits that these old feelings are basically just misunderstandings that arise because of the different problems with contractors and because of the various governing rules related to the co-op establishment or co-op structure, and not because of him per se.

> The woman, she realized this was all about the rules, and that made things better between us. I remember we try to fix all repairs or problems, because often time

> one thing leads to the next. If you have a water damage problem, and if I don't fix it right away, then it will affect the tenant underneath you and so on. So it does me no good to avoid taking care of certain problems right away. But with this particular tenant, no matter what I said to her or did made no difference in her behavior towards me. But one day a coupla years later, she gave me the key to her apartment because, you see, on the top upper floors, that's how it's built. There are valves used for emergencies, and you go in and shut the water. And I didn't have that access, let's say, and she has a large apartment and there are six different valves that control the water. And she finally allows me because her and some other of the so-called longer term, non-co-op owning tenants realized that I'm just here to do my job and do what I can under the circumstances. And a lot of people thought I was just the super for the co-op tenants, but that is in no way true to the case.

Sharif's explanations aided in providing an understanding of the co-op/rent-stabilized situation in his building. The underlying issue is money: these unsold apartments are highly valued. And usually when the building goes co-op, the person who owns the building at that point after the conversion will maintain it for a time.

Sharif says,

> That's exactly what the guy told me. He said after it goes co-op, he's gonna hold on to it for a coupla years, then wash his hands of it and retire to Florida. I can tell you now that the unsold apartments are usually sold to a bank or a corporation, or a real estate agency for a fee. Or just to one guy who wishes or hopes some of these old ladies will die off and they can sell the place for huge profit. Now, we are just talking here, because I don't feel this way at all about this. As a matter of fact, I think this is disgusting to say these things, but I'm just relating what I understand the situation to be and what I've heard some of these characters say. But it's not too far from the truth: die, and they can make some money on this place.
>
> So this entity, this bank, this person pays the co-op whatever today's fee is in order to keep the apartment until it can be sold at market price. What that means is they pay the additional cost of the apartment to the co-op in order to get the apartment when one of these old people die off in the hope he can cash in later. And that's exactly the situation in my building. All these people that hold rent-stabilized apartment leases, there is a company that owns these apartments, and I'm sure they pay more to the co-op for maintaining these apartments than what they collect. But of course, that's the cost of being in business. They know some people leave and or some die and others get divorces, and once something happens, they sell this apartment or renovate it and sell it in today's market.

I ask what percentage of the apartments are rent stabilized, and he says,

> I don't know the actual number, but we have about 25 apartments that were not sold. And there are 75 apartments in the building. But yeah, there are a certain number of apartments before the building can go co-op. You can't kick people out, and it's on a voluntary basis whether you go or stay. Let's say a yearly lease or one of those old-fashioned rent-stabilized/rent-controlled apartments, if you wanna stay here, you can. But usually some people, they see the value in buying or staying put, because usually they get really good deals. You don't necessarily have to sell the place for what the market will bear.
>
> For example, the 240 is a relatively large building about half a block, and it's owned by a family, and they are trying to convert the building. And they have given people the option to buy, which is way below market value. And the landlord gave them the option to buy, say, one million, and you can sell it for anything you want. And those places go for up to three million dollars.

The building he speaks of is near two tall buildings a hundred stories high, which are totally out of synch with the neighborhood, since the tallest building in the area is only 13 to 15 stories. Neighbors were happy, however, that the theater at the bottom of one towering structure was not torn down, just closed. Now for-sale signs line the marquee that movie titles once adorned. Up the street and two avenues away on Amsterdam, I asked Kelly whether she and her cotenants bought their apartments. "Well, no, we don't actually own our apartment. That would be like a condo. We are not a co-op, we are not a condo, we are a small company that owns the building. So we don't own . . . we own the building. We own shares in the building, which is not, we are not a co-op . . . in the case of a co-op, you own shares in the building, but you do not own your apartment. In a condo, you actually own your apartment. We are none of that, we are just a small company." Kelly explained that there were five original tenants who formed the company: "I bought out my boyfriend, and the corporation bought out another guy that wanted to leave, so there were three [share]holders left, and only two of which have lived in the building all these years. The third shareholder, we don't have much communication with. He's a minority shareholder; we don't see him. Yeah, so there are three shareholders. Two of us have lived in the building the whole time, and manage it."

While supers have issues with dignity and self-worth, so do some owners: Robert, an older man with a distinguished voice and face, carries himself self-assuredly and speaks to this matter as it relates to his playing both roles as a small-time owner of a building in our Harlem consortium. He says some encounters affect his dignity and sense of self-worth more than others. Though a super for part of his life, as a landlord and salesman, he is basically the quintessential entrepreneur, and his intelligent voice lends a strong analytical slant on the life of the super and the landlord.

I came into New York in 1980-something. I'm not certain of the exact month, though, because I haven't had a chance to think about your questions. I came into New York after leaving my job as a salesman from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, because my own area of coverage was upstate New York. I left Ithaca, New York, where I was living and moved into New York City in 1981, and immediately left with a newfound friend, Randy, and we left for a year to travel around Europe. I came back in 1982. And I'm almost certain, and I'm a little rough on this, but in 1982, we got together and formed EQOManagement [Equities Operations Organization]. I know I probably got the dates a little mixed up, but I do know because of my relationship with you and [J.L.] and Bill, I believe the first building we bought was on 134 street at 522 West 134th Street. And it was decided that I would live there and I would essentially be there living free for all intent and purposes, as the super.

Everybody knew I had no real work skills needed for the job but felt I could communicate reasonably well and could somehow gather people with talent and abilities in the neighborhood. That was the presumption, and that's how I went into the job. I took an apartment, which became my apartment and the company's office, and we started working on that building. Shortly thereafter, we came in touch with Paul Winford, and I guess there was a building on 148 or 149th Street, and we had some interest in another building that your sister lived in on 118th Street, and then we thought we could get Graham Court on 116th Street that you negotiated with the owner of that one for our little consortium. P.W. was involved in managing that one, and he would get us involved because he was 7A administrator there. Keep in mind that none of these buildings I was responsible for other than the fact that I was trying to cover for, in the sense that you might send me over to set up some kind of work relationship by getting an electrician to deal with one apartment. So it was only minimal involvement with these buildings, but my main concern was to deal with 522.

He recalls an experience that happened when he was in a position of power as landlord/super of his building:

I remember the incident where the guy wanted me to literally clean the shit out of his toilet to unclog it and felt as the owner and super I should do that. Well, yeah, there is a dark side to this whole thing. Well, I knew landlords who were really chaffed at the fact that tenants were paying rent-controlled prices like $34 a month for a one-bedroom apartment. And this tenant was one of those paying very low rent. I was at a meeting of landlords, and they were really pissed off as owners about this rent-controlled thing. One landlord explained to me how, well, let me tell you this way: In one of the buildings on 130-something street, this landlord had this tenant who was a bit abrasive, you might say.

A little arrogant, I guess you would say. And their relationship was not exactly pleasant. So this tenant, this one little guy who was noncommunicative as well. You know. He just made sure he got his $34 in every month, and he didn't wanna

have anything to do with the landlord otherwise. But basically, he [the landlord] wanted him out of the place. And I have to admit, this is the worst thing I ever heard anyone doing as a landlord. He hired some goons actually to ravage the guy's apartment. Yeah, and money passed hands, and they went in and thrashed his place. I know you don't wanna hear this type of stuff, but it did happen. But instead of him [the tenant] leaving, he basically took whatever the landlord was willing to dish out. The landlord could have done more than that, I mean could have gotten physical, got into his face, but didn't wanna go that far. He just went after the apartment.

I knew this landlord and we used to hang out together, and I'd go over to his building and he'd come over to ours, so I saw the tenant in question: this short, wiry little man about 4 feet 11, no more, who wore spectacles, not glasses, and he would often be seen wearing a suit and tie. Where he went or what he did was not known to us. He would come back each day with a newspaper under his arm, and he kind of turned his nose up at us as he passed through the hallway. His rent check of $34 was always promptly paid, and he seemed to revel in the fact that he was the first one to pay his rent on time every month promptly, without delay, his little $34. He gave me the impression that he could have been a former Nazi living incognito in America in an obscure apartment in Spanish Harlem. But my friend the landlord said to me that it wasn't only this guy paying his small rent payment that unnerved him but his attitude that he was doing you a favor by paying on time while he stuck his nose up at you as he passed by.

Life as a Tenant

In every landlord situation, there are those who are considered "good" tenants and those deemed "bad" tenants. Kelly explains about one such tenant in her building. This story illuminates the schizophrenic nature of the person who has to be both landlord and tenant. It is, to say the least, difficult. The main contacts in the social life of the super are the tenants, first and foremost, their families second, and then the community they live in, or some might say family first, then tenants, then community, but either way, the landlord or owner as their boss comes into play, too. These roles are often seen differently by the different actors.

"Well, off the record—no, on the record," Kelly begins, laughing,

He is African American, right. I'll report just for the interest of this research that we feel just this little edge because he's not really living in the apartment full time, and even before he sublet the apartment, he was only there some of the time. Anyhow, I think that he has a boyfriend somewhere that he lives half of the time with, perhaps I'm making this up, but . . . ahh no, I'm not making this up. He's not always there—period. And that's fine, but we like providing a home for people, you know? He's not living up to the spirit of what the building

> is all about. For instance, there was a time when part of his ceiling fell down, and we're the, you know, lovely landlord that lives in the building and cares about everything. He literally took us to the cleaners; he actually asked us to clean about $700 worth of his clothing that got dusty. So it just, it just feels like he doesn't get it, about the spirit of the building, which is a home where we all care about each other and try to do the right thing. So it's just sort of a little anomaly in the mix. You know, it just doesn't feel quite like he appreciates the building as the home that it is for the rest of us.

What Kelly left unsaid is that the tenant took advantage of the "spirit" of the house and exploited them, because the costs of the "dusting" should not have been the amount he charged. Whether the tenant was truly taking advantage or not, we will never really know, but from the point of view of the owner, he did. These situations occur every single day, and there is often no resolution that satisfies all parties. In the following case, I was acting as the super of a building I bought with partners in the West Harlem area near the Manhattanville Housing Projects in what is essentially the Spanish part of West Harlem.

While the super performs many tasks to accommodate tenants, some of which may be expressed as sheer bravado, other times the super is in a rather normal environment that involves work of a more mundane nature—and then there are times when situations rather tenuous and difficult arise. These may stem from certain cultural issues relating to tenants that supers might witness in their everyday work on the job. Like priests and lawyers, who often times are committed to secrecy regarding clients, supers are placed in awkward situations constantly requiring ethical considerations, and they must respect confidences even when not asked to do so. This can be seen in the following excerpt from my notes:

> I went to the Yunia apartment today for two reasons: one, to paint and plaster sections of the apartment that have deteriorated because of the general condition of the building structure and, two, because of the poor, rather unkempt, and destructive waywardness of the boys. The family consists of Lilith, the 37-year-old mother; Raphael, the father, about 40; two daughters, Juanita, now 17, and Isabella, 14; and three sons, Julio, 12, Jose, 10, and Miquel "Speedy," 8. The mother constantly complains about lost or stolen money, and this very day she claims to have lost over $80 as I worked on painting the boys' rooms. She felt the boys took the money.
>
> The room needed much plastering, too, because the boys had punched holes in walls after playing basketball and sticking a plastic hoop goal with nails into the walls. While I was there, one of the boys told me how the father was very close to his sister. I said that's nice, but he went on to say he kisses her like he kisses his mother, and I just said daughters and fathers are usually close, but he seems to

suggest something else by his look and comment. No sooner than he says this, I see the father emerging from the daughter's room, and he embraced the girl, but there was nothing untoward in this behavior.

Juanita is a sweet girl, well formed, and acts quite mature and gives orders to the boys as if she were their mother. I can't say the father looks lecherous or anything, but he was half-dressed and seemed to have a strong attachment to the girl. But the thing is, it turned out she is his stepdaughter. I found this out later, and I know it is not uncommon for such intimacy to happen in stepfather–stepdaughter arrangements, and such a relationship may be encouraged because he provides money for the household.

I have no idea if this is all there is to know about the situation, but Juanita is obviously the surrogate mother to the boys, as she cooks and cleans, chastises the boys, and orders them around. Speedy, the youngest boy, for example, got a spanking from her during my stay, and the house is very unkempt as long as the boys are in the house. Lilith seems exhausted, and the welfare benefits she receives are obviously keeping her on the marginal edge of poverty.

During my coming and going to attain materials from the basement, I expect the door to the apartment to be left open for my easy entry, but every time it was left open, she would say in Spanish, "Close the door," and this was to avoid other tenants peeking inside. This attitude is in view of the poor esteem that other tenants have of the Yunia family. Tenants often complain about the "pig-like manner" in which they live and the mother's lack of control over the kids, especially the boys. She looks exhausted and at the end of her rope. She expressed this sheer point of exasperation, and her lack of control, several times by shrieking loud enough for me to hear her. And I guess that shriek was from pure tiredness.

This journal note is typical of the situation supers find themselves in doing the daily work they are entrusted to perform, dealing with tenants and their woes as they attempt to adjust to life in the city, and keeping confidences in situations that are often too private to reveal. This is a cultural issue, and how it is dealt with is problematic. It is easy to get the wrong idea here, since a super unfamiliar with cultural practices could have construed that an incestuous relationship between father and daughter is occurring. I thought for a moment, if this is a deeply inappropriate behavior, should I call the police or an agency? On the one hand, I felt it was none of my business, and on the other, I felt it was if the girl was being abused. But how would I know that, if no one complained? I did not call a city agency or the police, because I may have misconstrued what was actually going on. Suppose it was not what I thought? As I thought about these various scenarios, I decided to just leave the situation alone until perhaps it got to a point where someone complained to me and asked for help.

Larry

There are supers who take their role as protector of the building and in some cases the block or the neighborhood seriously. The tendency to protect the building and the tenants fits Larry's efforts. He recognizes "bad elements" in "his" building and speaks about how those elements should be "weeded out." While I was standing in the lobby with Larry, a tenant walked out of the building who did not speak to anyone, which I took as odd, since Larry is such a friendly person and others seem to go out of their way to say hello to him. Others stop in the street to shake his hand, but this man just ignored him. As he walked out, Larry looked at me and threw his lips up and said, "He's one of those bad seeds we need to get out of here." Larry's behavior could be viewed in a number of ways, as overzealous or as simply taking his role as protector of the tenants and the building to heart. Here's more of what he said:

> This building is a co-op, and they sold three or four apartments in here over the first year and a half. And all the apartments go for $750,000, and that's why they wanna get these people selling those drugs out of here. But they ain't selling no hard drugs, just marijuana, you know. But why you wanna sell that stuff out of here in the first place? Why not go and get yourself a room somewhere? If you selling, people be coming and going, coming and going all day and all night, don't you know sooner or later the police gonna come knocking on your door, too? You got all that foot traffic, and if the police raid your apartment and you got your stash upstairs, what's that mean? You wanna lose a $750,000 apartment for a $20 bag of weed? That don't make sense. Not to me. You see, well, I think the neighborhood is great. Right now is not bad like it used to be. But we still got a little bit of cleaning up to do. Take, for instance, the school over there.

Larry was referring to a public school across the street, where a large fence runs half a block, sitting cheek by jowl with brownstones that abut his building and many of the brownstones he also supervises or at least does custodial duties for. It is those owners who constantly call him when repairs are needed. His son is also often the first choice for larger plumbing needs or jobs Larry does not have time to do.

> Now people stand or sit along the edge of the fence there and smoke reefer, and I say, "Hey, that's a public school. That's not right." Plus, they don't know this, but they got a whole lotta undercover cops that be working in the area. And every time they see a guy sitting over there, they come along and pat them down and take them away. This is a school, and you got to respect the school and the neighborhood. I like this neighborhood. The people that be buying the smoke

> from the one selling the reefer in my building be going over there to smoke it, and that ain't right.

Apparently Larry's conservative views represent the sentiment of brownstone owners, who are powerful people who prefer not to have such "riff raff," as he described them, smoking marijuana in their front yards. People should find suitable locations for such behavior, including their own homes, or they should, as Larry suggests, "put a shade on it."

CHAPTER 6

The Super and the Community

The brownstones on the side streets around 121st Street are attractive to potential home buyers, though this was not always the case. Only a few short years ago, this street and those adjacent to it were drug infested, and some buildings were even abandoned. The multiple effects of a lower crime rate, an increased population of Whites, a decrease in the number of visible minority groups, and a general feeling of safety created the tipping point for the community, where the "momentum for change became unstoppable."[1] It is not clear how many housing units have been generated as a result of the rezoning, but guesstimates are in the 1,500 range.

Today I have an appointment with Tolton, the super on 123rd Street, to talk about his neighborhood and other matters of concern. He purses his lips and indicates a building with a rental sign across from the statue of Harriet Tubman on 121st Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard. "The rezoning also make it possible to keep buildings low on the boulevard, you know, cause you be reducing the heights from 18–20 stories to 10–12 stories, like that, and like the building over there." He points to a tree across from where we sit. "I remember when that one was just a little plant, and now it's a full tree." He says this with such pride, as if the tree were a child in the neighborhood whose hand he held crossing the street. He holds his hands together and looks around as several well-dressed Sunday worshipers greet him in the garden. As soon as they leave, another young person comes into the garden and says, "Hello, uncle." Apparently, she is the daughter of one of his siblings. He speaks warmly of her, and this causes him to reflect on his family back in Trinidad and to recall when he first came to the United States and this neighborhood. When I ask how long he's been in the neighborhood, he is quick to point out,

> I been here 29 years. I have seen many of the changes that's been going on around here, and I don't want to be racial, but it kinda hurts for the people who live in poverty around here. It hurts me, you see, all the people I know gone. The old

> people, they gone, and their children, too. That is the kind of thing I see change. And the kind of people that come in—it's too expensive for the poor people to stay round, you know. And you know, I know how this feel, you know. From right here [122 Frederick Douglass Boulevard] on down used to be a ghost town, you know. And it change, and a lot of the people had to go. And the people who come, they don't know who come and go, but they know it was not them who had to go, only those who come. You understand. Look at that statue there. It's not a complete statue.

A statue of Sojourner Truth stands between the police station (23rd precinct) and the Triangle building with all the other gentrified buildings on the left and right: restaurants, a wine shop, Starbucks, Harlem Tavern, and so on down the avenue. I ask what he means, and he says the sculpture is not complete because Sojourner is not carrying the rifle she was known to have had with her on her trips to and from the slave states to the north with ex-slaves in tow bound for freedom. Tolton's contention is that the statue misrepresents the truth because it does not have an essential component, the rifle, which represents the power Sojourner Truth represented.

> Why they don't put the rifle in she hand? She supposed to have a rifle, and she have no rifle. You see, everything extend right from there, and the truth is not being told, because she no has a rifle. Maybe they thought the gun would be no good for the kids in the community to see, but the police, they have guns, carrying them every day right past her. Why not have her with the gun, too? Are you telling me by this thing she did not have a rifle? Give me the truth. Give the people the truth. Give the kids the truth. Because you're watering it down. And those are the things you see changing, you know. They changing the culture in these ways, you know. Take this building here.

He points to a building that has "Luxury Rentals" written in large letters on the side.

> They never said that when it was going up, ya know. It only say that after it finished. It only say "24 units for many uses" back then when it was going up. That's what they put there now. And I know because I can always see those things, because I was doing construction before, right? In the years when they decided to have houses for people to live, we have contractors. Minority contractors . . . They didn't have none. So what they do? They contract people from Long Island, and they get one Black person who will get a little contract that he sign. And he sign and he get a little work, but they act like he's got something bigger than what he got so they can say they have a minority working on the construction. The whole thing about it is they come in with *deception*.

Since this is a "micro" study, the strategy I employ is to enter into the experiences of the people whose lives make up the subject of this book in a truthful and understanding way, while also staying keenly aware of the larger implications for the neighborhoods where these men and women ply their trade. It is against the background of the neighborhood that this study is set, in particular the many changes: the gentrification (the good) and displacement (the bad).

Chilean-born photographer Camilo Vergara has documented many Harlem buildings and sites before and after. One photograph is of a man I interviewed named Eddie, who used to have a small patch of land he turned into a community garden on 118th Street and Eighth Avenue. A row of brownstones and a Starbucks now stands there. What buildings once stood where, and on which block, escapes our memory as building after building is torn down and replaced by another. It is photographic masters such as Vergara who keep those now-lost buildings alive in their photographic assemblies and our collective memories.

And of course, this displacement occurs with people, too. Eddie told me his family came from Alabama but moved to the Carolinas before he came up to New York to live with an uncle to work. One day I asked him if the corn, collard greens, tomatoes, and okra in his beautiful garden were for sale, and he said, no, the vegetables were "for the people around here. All you gotta do is come in and pick what you want. It's free." I had several conversations with him afterward, though I never got to pick any of his vegetables. Then one day he was gone. A group of construction workers were surveying the property when I came by the street heading for my garage, and I asked what happened to the garden. They said the property owners wanted to build on it, but they did not know exactly what kind of building it would be. I found out later it was a housing complex with a Starbucks, a Chase Manhattan Bank, and other businesses renting retail ground-floor space. This loss in the neighborhood is not only of structures, buildings, and stores but also of people and their art and occupations. As far as lost art is concerned, there was sculptor David Hammon's iconic thirty-foot basketball goal, which was a long telephone pole with a hoop attached that sat in the middle of the field across from his studio, where Eddie kept his garden.

It wasn't very long ago that we had women in overalls working high steel and men coming home from factories like the Taystee Bakery on 126th or the factories along 110th Street and Central Park West. Down on 110th Street, a number of manufacturing plants were housed in that block between Morningside and Eighth Avenue before Columbia built the twenty-story complex at 110th and Central Park West. This area has been renamed Fredrick Douglass Boulevard from 110th Street to 155th for some time now, and since at least the beginning of the aught years, a rash of new condos, apartment developments, shops, and restaurants have sprouted up, while a few have failed, such as Nectar (a wine bar) on 121st and Society (a cafe) on 115th. An owner of a new Internet

cafe recently told me, "I think when you look back six years or so ago, we had a housing crisis or slump, and that meant new development was cut off to this area. But you also had big companies coming in who could afford to wait things out, or even lose money for a while. You talking about Red Lobster, Popeyes, McDonald's—these companies can weather the slump and the storm, while these little businesses can't do that."

But today, new businesses keep cropping up along this corridor: a butcher shop, a West African bakery (Patisserie Des Ambassades), an Italian restaurant on 118th, Melba's Fine Cuisine, a yoga spot, and a CVS. And the main reason for these new establishments is the rezoning efforts begun by the Department of City Planning under the leadership of Amanda Burden. The effort to revitalize this swath of land (about 44 blocks) along Frederick Douglass Boulevard beginning at 110th Street did not pan out until 2013 after decades of "wishing and hoping" by developers that oversold properties and underdelivered promises of new clients, larger crowds, booming tourists, and new home buyers, which only began to appear much later than expected. The latest new development is the 125,000-square-foot mixed-use complex built by Artimus Construction, who also recently built another high tower on 109th and Morningside Avenue across from Morningside Park. These structures are not built for low-income residents, since only 20 percent of the 56 apartments are considered affordable, while 80 percent are market rate. In the 1980s, this used to be a dilapidated strip of abandoned properties, but the Bloomberg era (2002–13) saw the establishment of initiatives that made housing values expand in Harlem. Along this boulevard, starting at 110th Street and running to roughly 124th between Morningside Avenue across Seventh Avenue, a 44-block area was rezoned by the City Planning Department, because it was seen as prime undeveloped land and the city had title to much of these properties. The Manhattan Borough president at the time, C. Virginia Fields, brought in developers by bus to view the area, and what the city did not own, they seized outright, because many landlords had abandoned their properties by not paying the proper taxes. The developers were given tax incentives to make the area habitable once again. It is clear the rezoning is now in effect, as many more people are showing up around the clock, and the foot traffic so long desired is becoming a reality. And if more people come, then more retailers will follow.

The Church and Development

I meet Craig in the street, and he tells me about what's happening with developers in the neighborhood: "Did you hear about the NBA coming to Harlem? They gonna open up a basketball clinic right on 125th Street. I also heard the Time Warner guy is opening up a New Minton's. It's the new Minton's, because

as you know, the old Minton's closed a number of years ago. This one is gonna be across from the old church they're repairing or tearing down."

I mention to Craig that the old St. Thomas of the Apostle Church, which has been vacant since 2003, is set to be converted by the Artimus Construction Company into both a housing complex and a community center for the arts in 2014–15. This is the same group doing the 110th Street Central Park West building, the Morningside Ave 110th building, and the building next to that on Morningside Avenue and 111st Street. In fact, Artimus Construction Company has 46 properties they either own, manage, or are developing, 12 of which are on Frederick Douglass Boulevard alone, and 40 projects between 108th Street and 117th Street. Craig is not interested in this bit of news, but he talks about the loss of the church and points to something important about the neighborhood: "I don't know about you but I'm not a religious person, but I believe the church is sacred. You know what I mean? When I see what's happening to the church over there on 117th Street and the church on 116th behind that Renaissance Plaza building and several churches uptown, that people tell me they are selling to developers, I wonder if there will be any of the old churches left in this neighborhood."

It is not just uptown neighborhood churches that appear to be endangered but churches all over the city. There is a concerted effort by developers to buy up church properties with unusually lucrative offers that church officials cannot refuse, such as the deal St. Michaels and St. Anthony made with the Ariel East and Ariel West project developers in South Harlem. What Craig is talking about are several area churches selling their properties in order to make money and invest in property themselves. Many churches have dwindling parishes, low attendance, and crumbling infrastructure. Harlem is particularly vulnerable, since it houses so many historic churches, and while some are not architecturally unique, they are still community anchors with significant cultural meaning. I checked on Craig's comments and found he was right about one thing: the new Minton's restaurant did open up, and Time Warner is involved. Rumor has it that the owner will be Richard Parsons, and a man named Alexander Smalls, who was the former owner of Beulah's downtown, will be managing a new restaurant called Cecil's.

Craig continues: "I guess you can see they're repairing the buildings across from the park [A. Phillip Randolph Square]." The buildings in question are two old apartment houses that have been in disrepair for some time. The one on the corner of St. Nicholas and 118th is beautiful and historic and probably should be landmarked, while the other one on the southwest corner of 116th Street opposite First Corinthians Baptist Church is just as old. What is most interesting is that both buildings are sandwiched between the St. Nicholas Public Housing Projects. And Craig is keen to pose a question many Harlem residents

are asking: "How long do you think those rich folk gonna wanna stay next to the projects?"

Craig's last point is quite relevant to the situation I describe concerning A. Phillip Randolph Square in the next section.

The Public Square

When philosopher Jürgen Habermas wrote about the public sphere, he was talking about a space where the public meets and discusses the latest goings-on in the neighborhood, the community, and the city.[2] The public conversation today concerns changes people are experiencing in their neighborhood—changes affecting everyday people who at one time called this neighborhood home.

The Africans, or new African Americans, have a street festival that is at this moment quite small, situated right across the street on St. Nicholas Ave in front of the St. Nicholas Housing Project, and this little event is just about half a block long and is very energetic, partly because of the drums that give the whole neighborhood for blocks around a certain rhythmic syncopation. Perhaps it's the drums' historic roots, tied to the DNA of Black and Latino folk, that makes them resonate well. Whatever it is, it makes the little African parade or gathering unique and powerful in a way that big parades only do in spots.

But this same location where the African festival happens is a place of contention and ground zero for a recent battle between the city, the gentrifiers, and the local residents. It is situated across the street from one of the most expensive buildings in the area, at 116th and 117th Street and Adam Powell Boulevard. And though the public space here is referred to by everyone as a park, and the green Parks Department sign says so, it is in fact a square. It is named after A. Phillip Randolph, the social activist and labor leader who founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids (BSCP) in 1937, the first African American labor union chartered by the American Federation of Labor. The square is now being used as a homeless depot, and people can be found sleeping there. On the outside of the square, clothes are packed in bundles, and there have been complaints of people urinating and defecating right next to the angle-parked cars as they began living in the square all day and night.

The situation is difficult at best, and since multimillionaire tenants live right across from the square, calls were made to officials in the city to do something. I talked to one man walking his dog who lives in one of the big condos, and he said much about the negative side of the square. As most Whites in the neighborhood are newcomers, it is not difficult to see or approach them. I had my journal in hand, and when he stopped at the fire hydrant, I approached him, and I was careful not to use the word *gentrifier* in the conversation.

After I introduced myself and told him what I was doing, he said his name was John Almonds and that he'd bought a condo in the old warehouse up the street. We were both literally living across the street from each other and the square, and I had made note of the people being asked to leave by the Parks Department, and I wondered how he felt about it. He replied,

> To be honest with you, the people who are in that park are an eyesore and a health hazard to everyone in the area. There is parking there next to the park, and on occasion I park my car there. Well, I come back one morning and people have defecated right next to my car. I smell urine there, too. If they live in the park, they have to go to the bathroom somewhere, so that's where they go. Well, I don't think it's such a bad idea to remove those people, take them to a decent shelter, which would be the humane thing to do. The park belongs to everyone and not just those who are homeless, just like it wouldn't belong to a gang of gang bangers either. It's a public area, but now it is not being used by all but a select few.

This is a classic case of the rift between the rich and the poor, the gentrifier versus the older resident, a classic class battle. And both sides are right and wrong. Poor people have a right to the square but not to use the street parking lot as toilet. And of course, the gentrifiers have a right to the square as well. The problem is that the gentrifiers want the park to themselves, because if homeless people are there or poor people are there, the gentrifiers will not go there.

The issue here is about power and agency. Sociologist Sharon Zukin points out in her early work how city and federal funding has been increasingly reduced to the point where the private sector has stepped in to pick up the slack; parks, squares, and other areas are reliant on large corporate funders to be suitable for the public.[3] When Kornblum and I conducted a study of Central Park back in the 1980s, the then president of the Central Park Conservancy, Elizabeth Barlow Rodgers, made it clear that the conservancy needed corporate donors in order to do the restoration of the uptown end of the park. Corporate dollars means corporate influence over enforcement and park-related policies. The rich, well-connected gentrifier makes a phone call, and the Parks Department and the police department respond to evict the poor. Yet the poor need to have a place to go and would not defecate all over the street if public toilets were made available by the city or if they were not evicted from their homes.

When sociologist Elijah Anderson argues in his book *The Cosmopolitan Canopy* that such a "canopy" is an island of civility in a sea of segregated living, he seems to suggest that in order to break out of that segregation, one must embrace conflict, not civility.[4] Civility is only a temporary intercourse held together by the flimsy laws of social etiquette. And rightly so, since conflict is part of the dynamic, because engagement in the city makes demands on the

citizenry, and civility is not engagement without conflict, mixed with a cup of "niceness" and a pinch of tolerance. And tolerance, we all know, is essential to city life. The gentrifier such as Mr. Almonds offers up a kind of bourgeois civility that in essence is not serious interaction, since the bourgeois do not know how to navigate inequality, only how to control it when the odds are stacked in their favor. White gentrifiers are only comfortable when they are the majority.

After leaving Mr. Almonds, I went over to the Graham Court building and met Mr. P., one of the elder statesmen in the neighborhood, an elegantly dressed man with a white hat, shined shoes, and an ivory-headed cane. "I remember when this neighborhood was nothing but junkies and abandoned buildings," he says. He stands at the gate of the building, looking out into the street, and every now and then says hello to passersby. He's speaking about the West Harlem area from 110th Street to 120th Street. His wife, Linda, standing next to him, is the aunt of my friend Jackie. Linda says the neighborhood is changing for the better. Under the terra cotta ceiling of the Graham Court building, we talk about the neighborhood changes they have both seen over the years. Mr. P. speaks with the knowledge of a sage who has seen it all. "The street over there along Seventh Avenue from 118th up to 120th Street on that side [west side of the street] was mostly all abandoned for at least twenty-some years. I would say from about 1970 to 1990. And in the seventies, on this side of the street, you would have junkies lined up on 118th three deep waiting for the dope man to drop in. Or waiting for Sammy—the owner of the corner shop to get the big reds—those fat needles to shoot heron [heroin] with." Mr. P. and Linda are no ordinary citizens. They are window watchers, or that's what I call them, because their ground-floor apartment abuts the super's apartment and they have a perfect view of the street. On most days, one or the other sits at the window overlooking the street.

Window Watchers: Eyes of the Neighborhood

They speak to people, offer advice, and remind me of what the Halstead broker (Tyson) said about Harlem: "You have to remember that Harlem is not like the rest of Manhattan. There is a very vibrant community, and people go out into the streets and speak to one another. In the rest of Manhattan, that's not so much the case."

Window watchers know everything about the neighborhood, because they see it and hear it from their windows. Mr. P. sits most of the time either in his window or in various spots around the block—sometimes in the courtyard near the planted garden; at times in the bus stop seats, though he never takes the bus; occasionally under the ginkgo tree near his own apartment window; or just at the edge of the courtyard gate, speaking to people as they enter or leave the

building. "This was a different place thirty years ago. You didn't see no White folk around here then unless they were either junkies, old ho's, or cops. And even the old White ho's had Black pimps. But now you see White girls walking at three o'clock in the morning by themselves on these streets like it's no big deal, and it ain't. Because these streets are as safe as any downtown these days. These are a different time, and this is a different community, as anybody who's lived around here for any length of time will tell you."

The supers are the eyes of neighborhood, too, as Athena confirms:

> My involvement in the community, or any community I live and work in, is part of the beauty of being a live-in super, or having a live-in super. I'm very aware of what's going on in the neighborhood. If graffiti is going up two blocks away, I let them know it's on the way here, and I really keep an eye on it. I let the guys know it's coming and make sure every shift gets rid of it immediately, because that's the best way to deal with it. The way to combat it is as soon as it's up, get rid of it. Any kind of crime sprees, I just wanna know what's going on in the neighborhood. If I gotta go to the local precinct, I'll speak to them about what's going on, too. Recently there was rash of window robberies where people were snatching phones, computers, anything near a window and taking off with it. They just go up a fire escape and whatever is within reach, they take. A person could be in the other room or taking a shower and come back and their computer or phone is missing. And if I was in the neighborhood where this is happening, I would alert the other supers to be aware. For me, it's important to know what's going on in your neighborhood so you can let your manager know and you can alert your tenants.

A Public Place

The square has four benches in a tree surround, fenced in on two sides, on one side along 116th and 117th Adam Powell Boulevard and on the other along St. Nicholas Avenue. There is a camera mounted on the far west end of St. Nicholas pointing directly at the park. The people who make their place here are not all homeless or destitute individuals, I found. I went there a week after police and Parks Department personnel were seen removing people and possessions from the Square.

I walk across the street and see one of my street contacts, a woman who has been talking to me on and off about issues in the neighborhood. I don't have to solicit this information; I just say hello and ask how she's doing, and she gives her opinion about what's going on and begins to tell me things. She has a cart of foodstuffs she gets from a food distribution pantry run by First Corinthians Baptist Church on the far north corner. She says the people in that square also get food from the church and are not all homeless but mostly unemployed.

Today she points across the street to the square, where I notice a police car and a group of people standing about.

> The police came to take all the people out of the park and take their belongings away, and I think this has to do with the gentrification of the neighborhood. The rich people who pay $5,000 month rent in that building across the street want to have access to that park, and since these are poor people and homeless people and others in that park, they have no rights. They pay no rents and therefore the rich people believe these people don't belong in that park. At least that's what the people who want this neighborhood for themselves think. When my mother moved here 69 years ago, the rent was $100 a month. Now it's $5,000 . . . The other thing I've seen is people in the Square dancing and playing music and drinking and smoking, and I've seen cops bust people there for dealing, too. But the people are there and have probably nowhere else to go, and what they do over there in that place is not as offensive to me as it is to some people.

I tell her what goes on in the square is not offensive to some but is to others, especially people who don't want to step in shit before they get into their cars, whether they are gentrifiers or not. Koch's poop-scoop law only applies to dog owners. But I point out nevertheless that this is what happens when people are displaced in these communities as part of the demise of street culture and Black culture more specifically. This is the spic-and-span suburban cultural juggernaut emerging where the gentrifiers want a world devoid of anything that is not sanitized and standardized—a world where nothing is out of place. The culture that the tourists want to see, the truly indigenous life in its rawness, is essentially eliminated, because it is in the process of being gentrified.

The first person I talk with in the square for more than a few minutes is an elderly Black woman, Mrs. Yesters, about eighty years old. She looks a bit wane sitting on the bench, a bit lost, holding her black-handled suitcase in her left hand, and I decide to converse with her about the goings-on in the square. She is tiny, a gray sweater covers her legs, and her hair is wrapped in a scarf. Her dark, wrinkled face stares out into the square as if in search of someone or something. I begin taking notes, and when she looks my way, I introduce myself. I ask how long she's been in the neighborhood, and she doesn't seem to understand me. I wait a moment, then repeat the question. At first, she is reluctant to speak, and she only mumbles something quietly I can't make out. Then, suddenly, she speaks a bit louder and clearer.

"The neighborhood has changed a lot since I first came up here," she says,

> When I came up here, I started doing days work. Days work is when you be cleaning people's houses for $50 a week. Until I got into the union, and they had to pay us more money than the fifty dollars. But then I got into the hotel work. I

worked at the Martinique hotel for many years. The unions was in the hotels by then, and we had the unions demand that they pay us a decent salary. You know what I'm saying? And [I] got to become a delegate and got to travel all downtown, and the union made sure we got a decent salary per hour and per week and we got a different pay because our money went up. I had a boy and two girls, Joseph and Barbara and Sheril, and at the time I came up here to live in Harlem, I stayed with my aunt who lived up there on 140th Street, and after that I started getting rooms before I got my own apartment. I had only one child at the time. Then when I got in the union and started making more money, I got my own place.

When I ask about what happened to her kids, she says,

Well, they out here in the world doing everything they ain't supposed to be doing. That's what they did. I was working you know, but they got into doping, and everything they could get into, they got into. That's what happened. But they finished high school though. Then they got into those drugs and all that kinda mess and doing everything they weren't supposed to do. You got to have will power, and I remember I used to hang down town, but I didn't drink no alcohol.

I been living here for years. But when I first tried to move up here, you had to have references cause they wouldn't just let anybody come in here to rent even a room sometime. Yeah, you had to have a job, and at that time, you had mostly Whites up here, and then you started to have both Black and White for a while, then you had just Black.

I ask when exactly she is referring to. I surmise this was in the 1940s, but she corrects me:

At the time when you had mostly Whites, you couldn't rent no room or no apartment unless you had a job and some good references. You had to be [a] decent person. This was in 1930, because when I first came to this neighborhood, they had a lot of what you might call "private houses," and you could not just walk off the street and get in there. Landlords were even more particular, and they wouldn't even let you see an apartment if they didn't want to. But there were a lot of people who did get these big apartments after White folks started to move out, and they would rent out rooms, and that's when you started to see the riff raff come into some of these buildings. As a matter of fact, some of these apartments had makeshift paneling put up [as] dividers, 'cause the rooms be so big and they would rent out these different divided rooms to single individuals.

This dividing up of rooms was not limited to New York City. In *Black Metropolis*, Sinclair Drake and Horace Cayton write about the "kitchenette" in Chicago:

> The bulk of the lower class, however, was getting used to "kitchenette" living. Fragments of families; young bachelors; girls and young women living alone, sharing apartments or maintaining transitory alliances with a succession of footloose men—these were scattered throughout the Black Belt, often living in the same building with more stable family aggregations. The trend toward kitchenette living was speeded up by the fact that between 1930 and 1938, houses in the "worst" areas were continuously disintegrating or being demolished. The lower classes were being gradually pressed southward into the better apartment-house areas. Building after building in these areas was cut up into "kitchenettes," for an enterprising landlord could take a six-room apartment renting for $50 a month and divide it into six kitchenettes renting at $8 a week, thus ensuring a revenue of $192 a month.[5]

The building I live in had these same divider issues. When I took my apartment in the 1980s, it was cut up with makeshift dividers and had separate phone jacks and locks on kitchen cabinets. I was told by the 7A administrator that my eight-room apartment had been used as a place for boarders.

During a brief pause in my conversation with Mrs. Yesters, another woman comes over to introduce herself, saying it is her birthday. She's hanging out in the square with friends today and says to me, "I wanna tell you my story." She insists on telling her story, as she puts it, because she wants to let people know what's going on in her life in the Central Harlem neighborhood. She begins by apologizing to me, because, she says, "I misjudged who you were." She told people I was probably a nosy cop or Parks Department official, and but then she overheard me telling the older woman that I lived across the street and was writing about changes in the neighborhood.

Her name is Felicia. "I've lived in the neighborhood for 21 years, and I wanna share my story. I'm a single mother now with two children, and I was living at 315 . . . West 115th Street between Eighth and Manhattan Avenue. I came out of a shelter with me and my daughter and son. Like I say, I had section 8 housing before I was forced out."

Section 8 was created as part of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 and first included three programs—the New Construction Program, the Substantial Rehabilitation Program, and the Existing Housing Program—and then a fourth was added in 1978, the Modern Rehabilitation Program. The Modern Rehabilitation Program permitted private developers to build, own, and manage housing for low-income people with the requirement that rents could not exceed the fair market rent. Tenants received direct subsidies for rents based on their income.

Felicia continues:

> I was on public assistance when I first moved into the building. Over the years it has definitely been a big change. I've come to realize that in the buildings all around 315, the rent has definitely gone up. My story is, I was put out as of January 9, 2014, because, first, my building does not want to deal with section 8 anymore, because the buildings that have been built around us has more value, and they want to deal with people with money. And I also realize that since 9/11, people who were living downtown, for whatever reason they want to be in Harlem, and its affordable to them but not affordable to the people that's been living here all their lives and have seen the changes. Right? So November 9, I came home and there was a marshal in front of my door. They were in my apartment, and I never got any prior notice, but I was evicted, and I believe it was an illegal eviction. So I went to court that night with notice to show cause and things of that nature. Prior to this, though, my management about every three years or so, they would change their name, but it was the same management company. I mean it was the same people that worked there, but they changed their name. I believe they be doing some type of fraud. But they had been trying to buy me out since 2009–2010 for $5,000. They wanted me to move out of the building, and they would give me five thousand dollars to leave, but that would have caused a catch-22 for me, because I'm on section 8. I'm not in a position because I don't have finances. I have sick children.

Felicia, now more animated, speaks to a man calling her from across the square for a minute and then turns back to me. Her hands are rough and spiny-boned. There are rings on the little finger and forefinger of her right hand. "If I had taken the money, I would have had to relocate to some place I don't know where, and plus, that I may not have been able to afford as time went on, and plus, I didn't know how section 8 would view that, because everything is about income. Everything is about money. So every time I refused them, I realize they were taking me to court. And every time they took me to court, I won."

But Felicia did not realize that these multiple court appearances put her on a special list of troublesome tenants who would be blacklisted by other city landlords, who would refuse to rent to her if she tried to get an apartment in the city. The tenant blacklist works like this: tenant-screening companies use data that the state court system gives out daily on tenant cases that the Housing Court has on file. This data on tenants who have appeared as defendants in Housing Court is available for a certain fee. These companies then sell the data to landlords and brokers, who use it to determine if applicants for apartments are blacklisted. If so, they are generally denied apartments regardless of the reasons or the circumstances.

What apparently was also unbeknownst to her is that this tactic of taking tenants to court is a "wearing-down process," because after multiple trips, multiple train rides, and multiple absences from work, a tenant eventually misses

one of these appearances, and that is when the five-day notice is issued by the judge, because the landlord's lawyers do not miss court dates. This is what happened to Felicia. She missed one court date, and the landlord was granted the five-day notice, and when she did not appear, she was served an eviction notice. This is the situation many tenants face every day in housing court. As a matter of fact, there were more than 30,000 evictions in New York City in 2013,[6] and one reason for that large number is that Housing Courts are filled with lawyers for landlords 95 percent of the time, so tenants are at a disadvantage even when they do show up in court, because they usually do not have council.

Felicia continues:

> So this time they did the eviction underhandedly, because the super who had worked in the building for about thirty years . . . had been hanging around my floor often. And I often wondered why, but I realized he was watching to see when I would leave so he could call the sheriff or marshal or whoever the minute I left the apartment. The reason I was evicted was they say I owed $10,000, which is ridiculous, because how is that you would allow me to live there for years owing you $10,000? Again, I paid a portion [of the rent], which was $218, but when I went to court, the portion that they had for me, the portion they say I was supposed to be paying every month was $295.00. But I was never told of this, and they kept accepting my money orders, and on several occasions they sent back money orders to my home—not because I was paying the wrong amount, but because I had not put the money orders with the right management name on it. I put one management name, but they had changed the management again, and I had sent to the last one I had sent it to, and they said, "No, you have to send it to this management's name." Like I say, they were changing the management's name every two years or so, this was their reasoning. At the end of the day, the judge gave me ten days to come up with $10,000, which I knew I couldn't come up with. So I had to lose the apartment.

I mention to Felicia that she, like all tenants, was entitled to a copy of all her rent charges and payment history. She could have requested a copy to determine what was properly owed.

> I didn't really look into it. I didn't have a lawyer and I probably should have, but hey, I didn't have money to pay a lawyer. And even if you're dealing with the help that they are giving you downtown in the court, you still need some time before the court date to deal with that. I can't just walk in today. I needed help, because in court today, everything is a process. But I had to leave the apartment. It was hurtful, because that place I lived in is where I built my life with my children. It was devastating to all of us. I wasn't allowed in the apartment for five days. My son has sickle cell disease. My daughter is a chronic asthmatic. I'm an asthmatic, and I'm not even allowed to get my ID card, which was on the floor that day

when I was allowed back in to get some of my stuff. I ask the super who was standing there watching me if I can please get my ID. Pick up my ID and just hand it to me. This was my place for all those years, and now I felt like a prisoner in my own place. So then I had to go to a shelter, but I have no birth certificate or nothing to give them. But after five days, the judge granted us two hours to go into the apartment and grab whatever things that we could grab.

But after the ten-day process was up, I went to try and get a one-shot deal. We all know how the public assistance office works, and that was not really helpful to try to pay the money they say I owe. And at the end of the day, everything was done. They had gotten what they wanted, which was to get me out of the apartment. I saw, maybe three months later, my neighbor, and she let me know that there are new people living in my apartment, and now I had to throw away twenty years of my belongings, and I have nothing and had to start all over. So yeah. She say the new tenants are paying $1,700 a month. And I was paying at the end of it $1,000. And this is just how Harlem has changed and, what's that word? Gentri . . .

I tell her "gentrification."

Well, what does that really mean? I live in the building, and I saw a coupla of Caucasians coming in and out, and I'm a friendly person and I would say "good morning" or "good afternoon," and these people walk by you and have nothing to say to you as if you don't even exist. These new White people in my building don't care about me or my friend John, who is a great artist, or my neighbor's daughter who went to Juilliard and is a fantastic dancer. They don't care about that; all they care about is getting their apartments cheap. They don't care that I'm without means. All that means to them is I'm despised. And this is what we're doing, and it always come down to money. And it's a hurtful thing for people who are struggling and don't have the resources that others have to be treated like that just because you don't have money.

I want to say something about how gentrification has created neighborhoods that function based on what Marx called "use value," but I hold my tongue. I think about the question Felicia asked, about what gentrification "really means." It is such a poignant question because a true definition of what that word means is wanting. I'm reminded of what images Harlem conjures in my mind's eye: girls playing double Dutch in the summer; men shooting dice on the sidewalks; pimps with hip hitch strut; soapbox orators like Malcolm X and Charlie Saunders; street poets; Gil Scott Heron; Puerto Rican Day Parade; the urban blight; the drug scene; the brownstones; the subintelligentsia; the pinnacle of intellectual suavity; those eloquent voices of James Baldwin and James Johnson, John Jackson, Quincy Troupe, and thousands of other influential visionaries;

the apex of social awareness; the middle-class exodus; the Latino sounds of Celia Cruz and Pacheco; the cradle of African American culture. All this and more is what I thought about that is Harlem.

Over the medley of resounding and discordant noises—the cars and trucks whizzing by, fire trucks honking, police sirens screaming—people here in the square, regardless of fashion, fortune, or function, carry on. I notice several people with belongings near their feet or on the side of the bench where they sit or stand. The place is busy. A short, effeminate man with a pencil mustache tells me he is a singer at a local bar I am familiar with called the Paris Blues. He was practicing a funny little dance step, and he caught me laughing and came over and introduced himself. He says, "When you come to see me, just ask for 'Whut Fuh.'" I don't understand, so I naturally use the middle-class, proper pronunciation "what for." He spells it for me, "W-h-u-t F-u-h," and continues to do his little dance. This man brings back more memories of Harlem and reminds me of street singers, gospel choirs, jumping jazz clubs, stickball games, and boys with their pants hanging below their belts and their caps turned ace-deuce-trey.

I feel a little odd, at first, taking notes, because I can see people staring and probably wondering what I'm doing and who I am, but there is so much hustle and bustle, music playing, and people coming and going that it hardly seems to matter. I ask a man on a bicycle about the park, and he says he wasn't around and didn't see anything.

There is a spontaneous performance dimension of street speech you see in Harlem once in a while, like the "lean bop" or what used to be called the "gangster lean," and today it is exemplified by the gestures of a man I meet to who speaks with a funny accent, spits, moves his legs around, does a little shake with his middle body, spits, moves his arm as if shooting a basketball in a goal, spits, and then gestures to a male passerby by pointing his finger at him as if pulling a trigger.

He picks up a small collage painting resting next to him, places it under his arm, and sits holding a bicycle, which has a stuffed rag doll hanging off one of the spokes. He wants to sell the collage; I'm more interested in the bike. Harlem is a complex place. I reflect on this complexity—what Harlem is now, what it has been, what is disappearing, and what is still alive. I recall "Whut Fuh" and his dance step and think for a moment, "This is Harlem." You may not understand it; you may not appreciate it; you may be afraid of it; you may hate it or love it, but it is Harlem.

The Gentrification Cycle

Kathe Newman and Elvin Wyly write, "In the optimistic view, gentrification will not cause social conflict and will produce neighborhoods which are an

exciting mix of different races, classes and life style groups living together. The HUD Displacement Report takes the position that revitalization offers a 'unique opportunity' for integration (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 1979). A more pessimistic view holds that gentrification will force low-income minority groups out of desirable inner-city neighborhoods to less desirable areas, thus reducing their quality of life and diffusing and defusing their political power."[7]

The word *gentrification* was first used by sociologist Ruth Glass, who conducted research in London's Covent Garden: "Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced, and the whole social character of the district is changed." She tells of the working-class quarters being invaded by the middle and upper classes. "Shabby, modest mews and cottages—two rooms up and down—have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences."[8] What is called "urban renewal," "urban rehabilitation," or "urban revitalization" by some is to others "negro removal." Perception is a matter of who sees what and how they see it.

Felicia, who stopped for a moment and went over to see the man with the pencil mustache, comes back and continues our conversation:

> It's sad, because we are being pushed out to Queens, Far Rockaway, being pushed out to these other boroughs, because Manhattan is now the place everybody wants to be in. I don't know why or how or when Harlem became such a big thing again [laughs]. When I was a kid, nobody wanted to be in Harlem. People lived here and they left because it wasn't what they wanted. Now they're back. But Harlem is a beautiful place, and it was always beautiful in one way or another. Yeah, it had its problems, no doubt, but it was always home, you know what I mean? But the problem is when a certain class of people can affect other people's lives. That's what bothers me. And that's what affected me.

Pushing out people also means forcing out the culture that the people are inherently the creators and originators of. Felicia, dressed in a blue blouse and a skirt, I notice, is far more finely attired than everyone else in the square, and perhaps all the hoopla and attention she's getting is because it really is her birthday. As I make note of this, she's called by someone sitting across at another bench, but she tells them to wait and continues to opine about neighborhood life.

> And because it's a part of us as a Black people, we like to get together. We like to have a good time. We like to have our barbecues and our cookouts. But for the last ten, fifteen years or maybe even twenty years, we have police who will

> shut us down in the middle of having a good time. It's because they're afraid that something is going to happen. Now granted, things do happen. I get that. But to stereotype everyone like that, everyone you see on the sidewalk in front of their building enjoying their day with their family and friends, to assume that we're all bad, that's crazy. Really crazy. I was hanging out and I'm still fortunate, I'm a little further uptown now, and we had a cookout recently, and we had a beautiful day, and I realize that the police officers—the blue and whites just kept coming through the block. They just kept circling the block. So at one point, I was sitting in front of the building, and the cop cars slowed down in front of us, and I said "Hey, how you doing?" you know. But when I did that, they drove off. So, okay, I was glad they did that, but it feels like we have to put our defenses up all the time. But I shouldn't be afraid of police in my neighborhood. You know why? They're supposed to protect us.

I say to her that we have known for quite a long time now that the police do not live in the communities they serve and are not actually there to protect people but to protect property when it comes to minority folks. When more Whites come in, however, they will begin to protect them.

On another occasion, I heard a man in a barbershop say that the most protected people in Harlem today are White women:

> White women can walk the streets of Harlem at three in the morning these days by themselves without a care in the world, because God help the poor Black person who assaults or fucks with a White girl around here. The police will be there quicker than a New York minute. And I think this is why you see this resentment—resentment against them and their resentment against the community. They [the police] don't live here, and they don't respect the people who live here who happen to be darker-skinned folk. But it's a class thing, too, and we will see that more and more, since upper-class elite Black folks are moving back here, and they will be protected as well.

I recall talking to a man earlier in the years near Amy Ruth's restaurant, a hot tourist spot. He was pleasant until I mentioned gentrification. I'd seen him there many times before but never stopped to talk to him or buy one of his photographs. He sells black-and-white beauties of old Harlem: photos of musicians and night club scenes, portraits of Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, and Thelonious Monk. The weather was changing and it was beginning to get cold. His photographs were lined up on the sidewalk, and he stood with his hands folded across his chest.

> Gentrification, bentrification. Fuck that. It don't matter what you call it. It's all the same shit. Whitey man wants Harlem and he's gonna get it. All these apartment

> buildings are owned by white folks. Look at that building over there [he points to a new building across the street]. I bet you that's owned by a white man, right next to the Muslim house. Would you believe that? When Brother Malcolm was alive, he'd never let that get off the ground. He would have protested and scared them white folks right outta here. This thing you say, gentrification, ain't nothing but white folk taking over what they consider theirs anyway. They want Harlem back because Harlem is suddenly prime located again. Black folk should have never let that happen. They should have never let it happen to their home.

On the same subject of gentrification, one day Craig related a conversation he had with a woman in one of the buildings he works in: "I talked to this one woman who moved into this building uptown. She's a white woman, about thirty-something, and she said she now lived in an integrated building, and I asked her how many whites folk live in there, and she said only her. Well, I was thinking when white folk think of integration, they think of only one or two of them, but never a lot of other folks, who they see as a threat. It is a racist culture I'm afraid."

As I finished the conversation with the people in the square, I left email addresses and office phone numbers with Felicia. The very next day, I saw Parks Department personnel and a police car with lights blaring stationed around the square; workers were removing all the benches in the square. I noticed some of the familiar faces from the previous day's visit. People had their clothes folded over the edge of the iron fence on the St. Nicholas side, some were sitting on folded boxes, and others were leaning against the fence. I wondered why benches were being removed and planned to call the Parks Department to find out, but my guess is that they needed to be replaced from overuse.

In novelist R. Schulman's brilliant work *Gentrification of the Mind* (2013), she relates to what is happening to the community in that the book speaks directly to the relationship between structural change (gentrification) and greed.[9] I wonder, when does a community (in this case, Harlem) raise its hands and ask for permission for development or, for that matter, much of anything? What does "feudal cosmopolitanism" mean? For example, when the average person looks at an apartment building, they must see a building—good or bad—and love or hate it for its architectural features, for its park or square space, and for its local amenities, such as shopping, schools, and the like. On the other hand, an apartment building, like a community, is a hotbed of competing interests, many of them economic, and thus one could see an apartment building, built from the ground up or renovated, in a number of ways. For instance, you could see it as a master limited partnership, or as a union or nonunionized building, or as having architectural integrity. You could see it like a mortgage banker or

a landlord or tenant would, or you could see it as a rental unit or a cooperative or condominium.

The issue of gentrification (and where poor people go when they are displaced) is complex, because in a certain sense, the poor (the wholesale presence in a community) are part of the gentrification/development process. I am not sure how many studies have been undertaken in this regard, but I do know they span at least a few decades. Poor Black folks (and folks of color) are a major variable in land-use development and real estate speculation as far as displacement is concerned. All these varied interests are part and parcel of land and, by proxy, dwelling development (renovated or built from the ground up), and they are all further complicated by the issue of racial discrimination—which is to say, the legacy of absorbing Black people fully into the socioeconomic body politic of this country. The analogy of a "community ravaged" also suggests that there is a countervailing option: that feudal entities will sit down and partner with folks in a community and build and do what is best for them. There are instances where this is possible and public–private partnerships are forged. But the "growth machine" posited by sociologists Logan and Molotch moves on. It eats. It devours. It moves people wholesale. The edict in New York—and really our major cities as a whole—is "pay up or get out." As J. Paul Getty, one of the richest men in the world, once put it, "The meek shall inherit the earth, but not its mineral rights."[10]

This is the "new Harlem," I thought as I strolled down the street one day looking for Bobby's Happy House, the old record shop where I used to get the latest or older versions of James Brown and the Famous Flames, Charlie Parker, or Big Bill Broonzy. Bobby Robinson would have music playing, and people would stop and dance in the street near the door and at the window. I heard sounds emanating from around the corner, but it wasn't the record store, just a guy selling CDs on the sidewalk. I asked him what happened to Bobby's Happy House. He said it used to be on this block, "but where it moved to exactly I'm not really sure." "It was torn down," another man overhearing us says. "I think it's the KFC across the street replaced it."

I began to enumerate the different businesses along 125th Street: The Dollar Store, Dunkin' Donuts, Rite Aid, Duane Reade, Northfort Bank, Starbucks, KFC, Popeyes, McDonalds, Staples, Citibank, a large PNB Nation advertisement on Magic Johnson theatre wall. It was possibly the ugliest strip of commercial establishments I had ever seen. Who was to blame for this monstrosity? Let's see; the Harlem Urban Development Corporation, Charles Rangel, Percy Sutton, perhaps a host of minor players such as Dick Parsons, and Black MBAs from elite universities. That night, I went to a meeting to discuss the process of building skyscrapers along the 125th Street corridor based on proposed new zoning laws.

There are many intriguing issues raised by not only Schulman but other scholars as well. One of which is, where do poor people go when they are displaced? How can we account for their displacement? We are aware of New York City's "near poor" who are rent burdened; we can also consider that a proportion must go to shelters, as Felicia Townsend explained to me. Evictions must account for a large percentage of those 50,000 or so homeless people in city shelters.

In order to gather fully the opinions of as many people in the community as possible, I sought out those who are categorically referred to as gentrifiers. Who are the people moving into these communities? What do they want? And why do they come? They must know about the resentment felt toward them, yet they seem to see only the good that they bring to the community: better housing, more amenities, regular sanitation, higher end restaurants, consistent ground transportation. One recruit in the study moved to the community from out of town and kept a journal of her experiences as she braved the "new Harlem." She is a young white woman in her twenties, and she has lived in the community for a few years. Following are excerpts from her "Journal of a Gentrifier."

Journal of a Gentrifier

There's guilt in gentrification—there must be, even if a majority of the population doesn't experience it on a conscious level. Just like any other instance of social place and identity, it's critical to tackle disparities and understand how power struggles exploit communities with needs more critical than my own. I often wonder why my generation is so pervasive, yet invisible among young people. Are we entitled? Complacent? Guilty? Ignorant? Certainly we don't all experience the same level of connectivity with our neighborhoods, but we all continue to gentrify. What does it mean to gentrify? Is gentrification simply a profit-driven development system in which we are all complacent participants, or is there an element of agency that we, especially as young people, have in setting the direction of New York's neighborhoods?

August 29, 2014

I often think of my own place (and agency) in this work. I left Harlem for Brooklyn, a borough more suited to my price range and social activities and closer to my friends. In leaving Harlem, am I giving up on the students I've worked with there or the connections I've made to this community? Or did I make connections in the community on false pretenses? Moreover, was my so-called activism and engagement with the community simply a facade I adopted as a means to ignore the guilt that comes with being a gentrifier?

September 19, 2014

I've established a cohesive orientation to my entry in the text, but am I using the most reflexive methodology possible? What does it mean to leave a place and come back to study it and its inhabitants as "subjects" in the social world? Have I trivialized the experience of those being displaced by focusing on and challenging paradigms within my own demographic? Or is it best that I "stay in my lane," as many activists have suggested about social research in general?

October 22, 2014

It's incredibly challenging to discuss this research with others.

"What are you doing in a restaurant? Drinking? You're just trying to get liquored up," an undergraduate student commented.

"This needs some ethical consideration . . . is there a review board?" another asked.

Both students were white males living far from the harsh realities of gentrification, poverty, and the changing city demographics.

My explanation that it is "a mechanism to build rapport with subjects, establish a foundation of trust, and show that I genuinely care about their thoughts—no matter how inherently racist, classist, or otherwise unethical I may personally find them—through a process of mutual reflexivity and self-discovery" didn't seem to bode well with these critics.

Are they, themselves, projecting the fear of being studied? Is it threatening to be a subject? The three interviews I've secured thus far don't feel that way—in fact, most people seem excited. These two seem threatened—perhaps because they, unlike others, are aware of the undertones that necessitate such research.

Though I'm far from falling into the slippery slope of asserting such engagement is unethical—Terry and I have discussed methodology dozens of times through email and in-person meetings—I can't help but be curious to better understand where their apprehension, and defensiveness, comes from. Is this simply situational, or will it be indicative of my research moving forward? How can I learn to identify and navigate these responses off the cuff?

What Schulman argues in her book *Gentrification of the Mind* is apt here. She says wealthy whites who come into the neighborhoods as gentrifiers bring an element of power and privilege they assume by their very presence. They take everything for granted and believe inherently that they belong wherever they happen to be, with no consideration of how they got the wealth and power and privilege in the first place.

The rich gentrifiers are brought up thinking of themselves as deserving a certain entitlement. They see themselves as "economic rulers-to-be," and they are imbued with an attitude of what they are entitled to possess, whether it is a park or a square, a neighborhood, or an entire city or country. Gentrification

is not just one population replacing another but one set of attitudes, behaviors, ideas, and perceptions of what the city should be like replacing another. This displacement substitutes a diverse community for one that reflects dominant attitudes and perceptions held by those with power and agency. This young woman, at least, is reflecting on the matter with some degree of seriousness, and though the answers to her questions are not fully formed as of yet, they are the start of an ongoing conversation.

A Lost Street Scene

People are sitting on sidewalks during the hot muggy weather. There are no air conditioners in the apartments, so in the buildings tenants open doors and chat with neighbors as they pass down the stairs. I see people out cooking on the sidewalk on a Fourth-of-July-like day, folk enjoying themselves, men with t-shirts (or no shirts) and shorts, women holding babies and barbecuing, lawn chairs spread out by portable tables, jugs of water and beer and sodas sitting in icy buckets along the pavements. I think about the event and have an eerie feeling that this scene, this setting of Black and Latino folks cooking on the sidewalk during the hot weather, will soon completely disappear. This culture will pass out of sight in the next few years because gentrification will make it invisible. As gentrification happens, upper-class folks don't sit out on sidewalks, don't barbecue, don't lounge on lawn furniture on the pavement and eat with their hands and lick their fingers, holding crying babies. Rich folk have nannies to take care of babies; they sit in restaurants; they listen to music inside their air-conditionedcond ominiums.

Again, Schulman writes,

> Just as gentrification literally replaces mix with heterogeneity it enforces itself through the repression of diverse expression. This is why we see so much quashing of public life as neighborhoods gentrify. Permits are suddenly required for performing, for demonstrating, for dancing in bars, for playing musical instruments on the street, for selling food, for painting murals, selling art, drinking beer on the stoop or smoking pot or cigarettes. Evicting four apartments and replacing them with one loft becomes reasonable and then desirable instead of anti-social and cruel. The relaxed nature of neighborhood living becomes threatening, something to be eradicated and controlled.[11]

Gentrification is a word directly related to how cities experience economic transformation and policy interventions. The urban disinvestment produced economic changes, and federal urban policy along with the individual desire to attain the American Dream laid the groundwork for gentrification's appearance.

There is also an ironic twist to this gentrification issue, and it plays to the notion that Harlem and ghetto communities more generally are complex entities: the poor play an unwitting part in the gentrification drama. As an eye and ear witness to the unfolding phenomenon of gentrification in Harlem over the past forty years, I see the ghetto as a kind of hand-me-down architectural relic. It is devalued through lack of services, property qua landlord abandonment, redlining by banks, state retrenchment, manipulation by politicians, exploitation by developers, and desertion by the Black middle class, and it becomes abandoned and deserted until speculators reemerge and buy up the rundown property, and then wealthy elites, investors, and pioneers come in and the cycle is repeated, creating this spatial inequality. Sociologists Neil Smith and Sharon Zukin note similar patterns. Zukin writes about artists and gentrification in areas of Manhattan that were not ghettos per se in *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (1989), and Smith sees the problem more globally in *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (1996). He writes,

> Largely abandoned to the working class amid postwar suburban expansion, relinquished to the poor and unemployed as reservations for racial and ethnic minorities, the terrain of the inner city is suddenly valuable again, perversely profitable. This new urbanism embodies a widespread and drastic re-polarization of the city along political, economic, cultural and geographical lines since the 1970s, and is integral with larger global shifts. Systematic gentrification since the 1960s and 1970s is simultaneously a response and contributor to a series of wider global transformations: global economic expansion in the 1980s; the restructuring of national and urban economies in advanced capitalist countries toward services, recreation and consumption; and the emergence of global hierarchy of world, national, and regional cities (Sassen 1991). These shifts have propelled gentrification from a comparatively marginal pre-occupation in a certain niche of the real estate industry to the cutting edge of urban change.[12]

There is plenty of land in the United States, but the land that becomes valuable is that which is in urban corridors of the country. The irony is that because the poor live in such poverty-stricken neighborhoods, they become the target of speculators. Like vultures seeking carcasses, wealthy investors target poor areas, creating a spiraling, cyclical event. All this makes it possible for the rich to come back into the city and displace the poor, revamping and replacing a vibrant, improvisational, exciting culture with a standardized, conservative one.

To be fair, the account of my student who kept the "gentrifier's journal" suggests something different: that she is coming back to the neighborhood because she was raised here as a child before her family moved away in the 1970s when the crime and race problems made it untenable for whites to stay. When she

grew up and got her own money, she wanted to come back to the place so many good childhood memories sprang from. Of course, this account is perhaps rare in the life stories of most gentrifiers, but nevertheless it is important to consider.

The idea that revitalization (another euphemism for gentrification) is good because it offers an opportunity for integration is a red herring, because in fact revitalization is not for the poor but for the rich and wealthy. It is a monolithic culture that emerges within the confines of revitalization, not a heterogeneous one. Public policy and private market forces (speculators) cohere to push out the financially weak and those with little or no organized power—the poor, in essence—to the periphery of the city, reducing their quality of life, diffusing and scattering their voting power, and making them even more politically weak than before. The state's role in this process should not be overlooked or underplayed either, since it has taken a more aggressive role than most would recognize in this process of displacing the poor. The state often begs off when enough private money is infused into a community undergoing revitalization. The various components of the displacement process include the destruction of housing, increased housing costs, landlord evictions, ownership conversions of rentals into condominiums and cooperatives, and higher taxes and higher rents, the sum of which creates a disrupted community network where friends, neighbors, and associates are bound for different locations, often never to be seen again in the same way.

CHAPTER 7

The Super and the Building

> Lord: the warder, the keeper of bread, bread winner, head of household, the master of those dependent on him for their daily bread. The word refers to the owner of property. "Lord" survives as "lord of the manor" and "landlord." In the Bible, cf. Matthew. xxviv.45.
>
> —*Encyclopedia Britannica*

What it means to be a super in a city like New York with its multiethnic groupings and tenants from all over the world, in a highly industrialized society to boot, may be different from what it means to be a concierge in Paris, and it may be quite similar to what it means to be a super in Cleveland. Such differences could relate to the community ecology of each location and the degree to which supers apply themselves to their work and handle the tenants under their care. As the neighborhoods supers work in change, the building becomes the single most important dynamic, because the basis of the social structure relies on this one entity, which comprises all the elements of that structure: the super, the tenant, the landlord, and the surrounding neighborhood. This relationship among space, population, and material conditions of life makes up the community ecology I refer to. The various identities of tenants (nosy, troublesome, unreliable, nasty, stuck up); landlords (stingy, cold blooded, vicious, mean); supers (lazy, two faced, nice, tough, sweet, obnoxious); and the neighborhood (good, dangerous, safe, gentrifying, bad) are all designations given to the various parts of the social structure. In addition, there is another social network based on identities outside the neighborhood that is crucial to what happens inside the buildings. These are the developers, rich investors, speculators, tourists, and gentrifiers who make up a cadre of forces impacting what the inside and outside of the building are and will become.

All buildings in New York must meet certain requirements, whether they are high-rise corporate structures, low-rise housing projects, dwelling houses,

domestic buildings, shops, abodes for the working class, factories of all kinds for all general trades, studios, electric power stations, cold storage buildings, stables, slaughter houses, or public buildings such as churches, schools, hospitals, libraries, or hotels. In addition to meeting the requirements of the clients, the various buildings have to be constructed and planned on clearly defined lines, according to the rule of the various authorities that control their erection. For instance, in England, the construction and planning of public schools are governed by the board of education, and the construction and planning of churches are governed by the various societies that assist in financing the assembly of the edifices. Dwelling houses in London must be erected in accordance with the many building acts. These types of requirements are referred to as codes in New York City, and they now govern the materials to be used and the methods by which they shall be employed, the thickness of walls, the rates of inclination of roofs, the means of escape from fire, drainage, space at the rear, and the like.

These laws especially forbid the use of timber-framed buildings. In New York City, the stairwells and other exits must have fire-resistant material. The conditions necessary for a successful building are ease of access, good light, good service, pleasing environment and approaches, minimum cost, and brick, mortar, and stone forming the elements of the more solid parts of the edifice. Regardless of these criteria, activist reporter Jane Jacobs argues, "Cities need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them. By old buildings I mean not museum-piece old buildings, not old buildings in an excellent and expensive state of rehabilitation although these make fine ingredients—but also a good lot of plain, ordinary low-value old buildings, including some rundown old buildings. If a city has only new buildings, the enterprises that can exist there are automatically limited to those that can support the high costs of new construction."[1]

This is a great way to say that gentrification in all its forms is not always needed, nor should it always be welcomed. But the question of what makes a building a social system is the issue at hand. In addition to the landlord and the tenants, the super acts as a third element in the social system of the building. Psychoanalytically speaking, instead of being governed by the id, the building is governed by the ego. The landlord does not directly fight with the tenant he is angry with; he uses a mediator (the super) to deal with conflicts and issues that arise in the building. In this regard, there are a number of issues to be considered, especially if you require the building to be functional, or operate to do what it is intended to do. The building acts as a social system because it is a place where people eat, drink, sleep, and communicate. If a "system" is any collection of interrelated parts, objects, things, or organisms, and people are construed as social objects, and the things that people do are seen as cultural

objects, then a social system in a building is a purposeful collectivity where people interact for the purpose of community. Sociologist Talcott Parsons states in his book *The Social System* (1951) that a social system is defined in terms of two or more social actors engaged in more or less stable interaction within a bounded environment.[2] The building becomes a social system in just this way: it is a place where people interact, hangout, live, die, and become friends (or enemies), thus maintaining some kind of relationship with one another, including with the super and the landlord.

Social activist and journalist Jane Jacobs writes, "Often two women from two different buildings will meet in the laundry room, and recognize each other; although they may never have spoken a single word to each other back on 99th Street, suddenly here they become 'best friends.' If one of these two already has friend or two in her own building, the other is likely to be drawn into that circle and begin to make friendships, not with women on her floor, but rather on her friend's floor."[3]

There are many different kinds of building structures, from schools to libraries, and if books and their users make a library what it is, then it follows that it is the people and their use of the building as a dwelling place—a place of active participation in the life of the building, in the common areas, in the hallways—that make a housing entity a social system. These behaviors, actions, and confrontations make the building both a social system and a socially constructed reality, just as the activities surrounding the building outside make it part of the whole system of the community at large. As in any ecosystem, where waterways may connect grassland to the animals in the environment, the building plays a vital role in the neighborhood ecology.

Yet it is also a place where income is generated from rents. And while I did not want to see the eviction of elderly tenants when I was a landlord, and felt morally and ethically concerned that an elderly couple might be put out on the street, I knew I also wanted the rent money paid. In this way, the building represents a "home or residence and a commodity for buying, selling or renting." Sociologists Logan and Molotch argue, "The sharpest contrast is between residents, who use place to satisfy essential needs of life, and entrepreneurs, who strive for financial returns, ordinarily achieved by intensifying the use to which their property is put."[4]

The Social Field

I have generally always sided with tenants and felt that landowners were money-grubbing ogres who did not have a kind bone in their bodies. I used to naturally feel that tenants were right and landowners wrong in most instances. But after becoming a landowner, my emotions became increasingly bifurcated. If a

tenant owed rent money and still demanded services, I felt he or she was taking advantage and using the law to shirk responsibility, and this pissed me off, not just as a landowner but as a human being. It was these kinds of situations I found myself in at times. But this also reminded me of my days as a super apprentice with Mr. Henry, and I recall some interesting moments from that period. One of those moments came in the form of a story about landlords and tenants—a kind of paradigm of landlord–tenant relations.

The building my sister, her husband, and I lived in was owned by a woman everyone called Shellburgo, a no-nonsense, rather pale-looking woman who looked like my third grade schoolmarm. A taciturn and unsmiling person about forty years old who reluctantly spoke, Shellburgo looked at times to be perhaps older, because she wore plain, old-fashioned clothes and was rarely ever seen "dressed up," except for one time a year.

The apartment house she owned was located next to St. Joseph Holy Family School on 126th Street and Convent Avenue, built in the 1800s, and also to the south next to St. Mary's Episcopal Church on 126th Street and Morningside Avenue with its well-manicured grounds, sitting cheek-by-jowl on the backstreet at 126th with mechanic garages, a bar at mid-block, and empty lots. At the back end of the block, an old bakery left the area smelling of baking dough, and the bricked soap factory buildings across from it face a back alley. La Granja, the fresh wild meat and poultry market (also called a *vivero*), is still there, though the soap factory is abandoned. Directly across the street, a bar stood on Morningside Ave (which is now a *groceria*), once booming with workers, postal employees, doctors from Columbia Presbyterian, local hustlers, and of course the street dice (*cilo*) players, across from the post office, which by the way remains pretty much the same as it always looked. So I guess God and stamps are only sure thing around here. And Mr. Henry and other supers from some of the bigger buildings on the block used to hang out at that bar, and when it was not too late in the day, they would cavort with regularity there, and even the owner, Shellburgo, could be seen sitting at the bar with Mr. Henry between rent collections.

Every now and then, Shellburgo would arrive in the building "dressed up," as it were, and knock at the apartment doors not just to collect the rent, which she did monthly, but to inspect the apartments. Shellburgo would come in, look around in each room, always carrying a clipboard, and make notes on, I assume, the conditions of her property. She would sit down and have coffee or tea but never eat anything, though my sister was a terrific cook. These visits were semiannual or annual, I don't really recall clearly, but I do remember how my sister would prepare for these occasions. She would get the apartment really clean and adjust the furniture just so, and I reckon these visits served a dual purpose now that I reflect on it. They allowed for a certain social exchange: the

landlord saw the tenant as an individual, and the tenant saw the landlord as a human being. Mr. Henry and I would do things prior to these visits as well, and though I wasn't sure of the urgency around those times, I do know we went to several apartments and asked tenants what needed repairs or painting.

If something major needed work, Mr. Henry would call in his friend Bobo who lived down the street to help him fix it. This rush of fixing by the landlord and cleaning by the tenant was so each could avoid problems. The landlord wanted things right before she arrived, and my sister and other tenants, I'm sure, wanted the apartment right before the landlord left the premises. These were mutually agreed-upon situations intended to short-circuit any potential litigious concerns that might occur (on both sides) if things were not properly done. Evictions and lawsuits could be avoided before it came to that.

So here was a social field that could leave both parties satisfied. No class warfare this time, no evictions for lack of respect for the landlord's property, and no lawsuits for poor maintenance of the tenant's apartment. Though there was still social antagonism in the relationship between tenant and landlord, it was defused on several fronts because of the way the landlord handled and managed the building itself. First, she had a Black superintendent, and second, the social practice of the visits gave her positive credits among tenants. It obviously did not eliminate the socioeconomic distance, but on a personal level it worked just fine and cut short any conflict on the economic level as well. In other words, thing never got too personal.

This idea of social exchange—a kind of economics of mutual respect that does not negate the exchange value, as it were, of a tenant's apartment as a commodity and does not delimit the humanity of the tenant either—is important. I felt this kind of exchange made for a more stable community and property structure, too, because it suggested that tenants and landowners can demonstrate satisfaction when they work in tandem with each other as opposed to in adversarial ways. In Roman law, the relationship of landlord and tenant came about from the contract of letting and hiring (*locatio conductio*) and also existed under the forms of tenure known as *emphyteusis* and *precarium*, or tenancy at will.

The relationship between supers, tenants, and the building proper are key features in this chapter. However, I always felt that the buildings my partners and I owned held a dual character, and the relationship between us and the building was indeed schizophrenic. This was particularly true of one partner who I shared the super duties with, tending to the day-to-day operations of the building. Some initial impressions were felt by my landowning partners who managed the property as both landlord and super. Following is a brief account of how this ownership began and excerpts from our conversations looking back.

The Consortium

The consortium, Equities Operations Organization, was in fact a management company set up so that I and two other investors could become landowners in Harlem. This entity progressed by geometric proportions. Paul Winford (pseudonym)—the man I recommended we hire as manager of the properties—called one day to get my opinion on whether the group should place all the properties into a shared, jointly owned pool. This would mean all the property would be owned by each member of the group. He did not say exactly how much each share would cost or be worth, and I could only guess that members would purchase shares at the cost of the original purchase price of the property. One example may help illuminate the plan. There was a Yugoslavian guy, a landowner we met named Jackowski that people in the neighborhood called "Tom the Ignoramus" who owned two excellent properties. He had galvanized his indefatigable energies in such a way that his buildings were exemplary specimens, models for what we as a group desperately, or should I say, urgently wanted to accomplish and emulate. I never really found out why they called him "the Ignoramus," though his manner was a bit bullish and obnoxious. But his business acumen was smooth and refined as far as I could tell. He had properties on the market with asking prices of $250,000 and $600,000 respectively, and this seemed hardly the work of an ignoramus.

He had originally purchased both properties for under $100,000. If we were to purchase shares, it would beat the original price, I would hope. If all three of our buildings were jointly owned, it would immediately increase my/our personal wealth beyond anything I could imagine, given the short time we had been in business. We had started in 1983 around spring time, and this was now only two years later. The meeting took place at the City University dining commons on the eighteenth floor in Times Square, where the university graduate division was then located. A friend and professor introduced me to a Cornell alum who was now a Wall Street trader with cash to spend on investments. As an adjunct professor, I had little money but lots of enthusiasm, and with my few bucks, I decided to put into practice a theory I had learned in one of my classes taught by a recent graduate from the University of Chicago.

The theory, developed by Ernest Burgess, was called the concentric zone theory or the Burgess zonal hypothesis,[5] a concept I explained to the Wall Street broker in discussing the land situation in Harlem. Burgess believed the major outlines of the city's shape or configuration could be represented in a zonal diagram. In his work, he chose to represent the city of Chicago. This was in the early days of Chicago's urban research efforts, mostly led by Robert Park and Burgess, who were exploring ways of understanding the city and its local customs, traditions, laws, and rituals. In their zonal pattern, the central or main

zone was occupied by the central business district, and right next to that was a zone in transition. Now, these spatial areas were miles apart, so if you were moving from say, Times Square, the zone in transition would be Harlem, and the next zone in transition after Harlem would be the Bronx. These zones are defined as inner city areas around the central business district and are usually mixed land uses, ranging from car parks and abandoned buildings to slums, cafes, and older tenement structures, often converted to artists' enclaves and industrial use. But these zones in transition would include edge urban areas and first-settlement areas for new arrivals (immigrants and migrants). Burgess saw this third area as occupied by working men's homes outside the slum. Then came a residential zone and lastly a commuter zone. This led me to suggest that Harlem was in such a state of transition and purchasing real estate at this moment in time could be the right thing to do.

Between the central business areas and the outlying areas, there would be zones in transition, and these would be essentially areas of abandonment and slums that would be hotspots for real estate speculators. The challenge was guessing which areas in the city would be most likely to transition and how long would it take. This was the hard part, because a lot of the city was pretty fucked up. Harlem, South Bronx, Brooklyn's Williamsburg section, and parts of Queens were in bad shape. I imagined us as speculators, since that was the pitch I made to the investor, who was an old friend of my professor.

He decided to take the idea and buy worthy properties starting with brownstones. We searched all over Harlem for brownstones and moved from brownstones to apartment buildings. First we chose buildings that had only a few tenants, buildings without elevators, and then we moved on to larger properties with or without tenants. We all agreed that tenants were problematic, but if we got good solid buildings, we could fix and sell them. At the time, I was also interested in buying a brownstone on my own outside of the consortium, to fix it and then try to sell it, since many were available.

I had a few friends approach me to find them property to buy, preferably brownstones as well, because they heard about what I was doing. My first meeting with the investor, J.L., was awkward because he was distant and just plain aloof. He appeared distracted, by what I don't know, but he turned out to be a very nice man. I felt he might have been uncomfortable with me more than I was uncomfortable with him, and maybe I was a bit off-put by his standoffishness and his focused look. He had a habit of remaining completely focused on a question or an issue for what seemed an inordinate amount of time. I later learned it was just the way he was, and this was a positive power used to solve difficult or complex matters.

The partnership purchased its first property in Manhattan at 522 West 134th for the modest sum of $51,000, of which we all contributed a share. I

will spare the details of how much each of us put in, but I can say that mine was the least amount. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Ellis, an elderly couple, were both tired of running the property and frustrated at city housing bureaucracy with all its archaic rent laws and labyrinthine regulations, growing more voluminous every election year, and decided it was time to retire. We would inherit that city bureaucracy, one that systematically punished landowners large and small but of course hit the smallest ones hardest. The recent rent laws and regulations made it virtually impossible to increase rents comparable to the continuous rise in living costs. As a result, people like the Ellises and thousands of other small land owners were abandoning their properties at a rapid rate. This all changed within four years.

After the meeting, a deal was struck, and a business company was devised to buy property in the Harlem area. I went to see Paul Winford, the 7A administrator for the Graham Court building, and also met with the present title holder of the building, who was a Palestinian physician. He was a short, stocky man with a quiet voice and polite manner. The backstory to this building is important to tell here.

Around 1978, my sister had moved in her fifth-floor apartment in this elegant landmarked building, and she and other tenants had fought for years to own their own apartments. This was done with the help of a 7A court appointed administrator. By February of 1987, the tenants saw a chance to own their apartments for the unbelievable price of $250 each. Most of the apartments had fireplaces, six to eight rooms, multiple baths, and were quite beautiful; this is where the luminaries of Harlem once lived. But all this was dependent on the city foreclosing on the building for back taxes owed, which were considerable—almost one million dollars. This $250 buyout by tenants was under a special city sale program that would help the city end two decades of mass abandonment across the city but especially in Harlem East and West, the South Bronx, and parts of Brooklyn as well. My sister relates what happened next:

> I told you that the city reneged on the deal somehow and the deal fell through. We were all pretty sure that we would get our apartments after all we'd been through with the no heat, no hot water, no elevator service, "the piss-stained stairs and the monkey man's wares" as poet Jane Cortez once wrote. But we were really fucked over because we knew the city and the landlords were in this thing together, because they kept giving the landlords more time to come up with the money. If they had stuck to their original deadline, we would have had the apartments. But the landlords started grabbing up property in foreclosure by paying back taxes. Why were they allowed to do that at the last minute if they were not in this together?

I have dug a bit deeper into the whys and wherefores of the matter: First of all, sometime in February 1987, the city did have relationships with the landlords, because they gave landlords a four-month grace period to pay delinquent taxes. Landlords took advantage of this, and $933,000 was paid by the landlord at Graham Court to the city tax collector at the eleventh hour. Another point is that the city was concerned about abandonment because for years landlords had simply walked away from their properties or torched buildings they owned for the insurance money. It was part of a desertification process that lasted for decades. Landlords were walking away from an estimated five dozen apartments a day, abandoning thousands of buildings and leaving whole communities pockmarked with deserted buildings and lots, mostly in upper Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn, and parts of Queens. This desertification had other effects only recently acknowledged by the work of Dr. Mindy Fullilove, who noted how disinvestment in poor neighborhoods led to public health crises including AIDS, crack addiction, obesity, asthma, and posttraumatic stress. She described the effects as "root shock," which is "the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of the emotional ecosystems."[6] State retrenchment in poor neighborhoods and the replenishment of wealthy ones puts a human face to the havoc that gentrification and displacement has on visible minority communities.

In my interview with a landlord of one of those deserted buildings, he cleared up some of the confusion around the building issue: "The city and everyone knows that property in this part of the island [Manhattan] is going up, and the people who owned this property do not want to lose it. I paid the bank $50,000 for this building, and I want a million dollars for it, and I believe I can get that. But I just don't want to sell to Jews."

He did, however, sell to a Jew, Leon Sharf, for a million dollars, and as property values continued to rise in Harlem, buildings that were tax delinquent and were once owned by the city were being reverted back into private hands. This meant properties once on the edge—marginal, if you will—were now being reclaimed, and this fit exactly into what the city wanted, which was to end abandonment. However, the city was interested not in redeeming properties but rather in converting the city-owned properties into co-ops for the poor, though I know of no such plan taking effect.

I had already met with J.L., my partner in the buying of several properties. The historical landmark structure commissioned by William Waldorf Astor and designed by architect Clinton and Russell was not in the greatest shape and had seen better times, but we wanted to own it nevertheless. Clinton and Russell, the architect, had also designed the Apthorp building on 79th Street and Broadway. I met with the super, and he showed me some of the apartments. My sister lived on the fifth floor and told me all kinds of stories about pissy elevators that

only worked some of the time, heat so intermittent that tenants had been on rent strike for the past two years, general disrepair, poor or infrequent garbage pickup, drug dealing in hallways, among other problems building-wide.

I had another unusual opportunity to sit down with the owner, M. Siddiqui, who had owned the Graham Court building for seven years. He had acquired the building from Bankers Trust and the Astor Family Trust for $50,000 and was very eager to sell the property. He admitted that the Internal Revenue Service was holding $175,000 of his money, but he did not reveal the reasons. As owner of the property, he wanted assurances that he would get renovation money and support from the city for relocating tenants. He had expressed in a snide comment the last time we met that he did not like Jews and was distrustful of them. He knew that my partner was Jewish, and he was reluctant to come to terms, but he needed the money. He said he would take $500,000 for the property, and a closing date had been tentatively set.

There is no administrative district called Harlem (though there is the 110th congressional district, of which Harlem is the area designated), but there are plenty of mental maps people in the community give to Harlem. The 2008 census showed that the community or village called Harlem extends from 110th Street to 155th Street, river to river, but the 2013 census states that Harlem begins at 96th Street and run up to 155th Street, river to river. There are three community districts that make up Harlem proper: districts 9, 10, and 11. (The 110th congressional district is now the 113th.) The eastern border is basically Spanish Harlem, "El Barrio," now called "Little Mexico," and begins around Fifth Avenue. The western border encompasses Morningside Park, which separates West Harlem and East Harlem from Columbia University, which does not like to consider itself part of Harlem, just Morningside Heights.

Robert, a fellow consortium owner, sits with his hand on his chin in the small apartment he is house-sitting for a neighbor. We have sat down to talk about the time when we were both in the business of real estate. "Well, it's funny you asked about that, because I remember us talking about not wanting to be slum landlords and wanting to have good rapport with our tenants. And that we were going to keep the building in good shape. But I'm not sure if it was a tenement or not, right? Because it has to have ten or more floors to be an apartment building, and so 522 would have been considered a tenement building, right?"

I remind him that we must have paid about $60,000 for that building, with our partner Mr. L. paying the bulk of it. I ask Robert's opinion about whether landlords today make too much money with high rents.

Robert pauses and says,

> My guess is this would be building by building, the answer to that question. Some buildings would justify higher rents, while others would not. That would be my guess, Terry, because I would not have any real reason to say that. Now to some degree, our rent-control apartments were turning, and that's an important consideration, because we had at least three or four people in the apartment whose rents were below one hundred dollars per month. And the smallest apartment I'm talking about would have been a one-bedroom apartment. And there were some three-bedroom apartments people were paying, like the lady downstairs, and we had some tenants whose rents were hideously low. But to answer your question about whether the landlords make too much money, I would have to say this. If you offer a tenant a clean apartment with running water, working electricity, and heat, it would seem to me that people would have to pay at least a fair rent. You know what I'm saying? What is a fair rent? One of the things we did early on was that we freed up two-bedroom apartments, and before you know it, we had the highest rents on the street. I had at least one or two other landlords come up to me and say, "What the Hell you doing here, charging five hundred dollars a month!"

I remind him of how we had some political concerns about how to treat tenants. Our concerns were not always reflected by higher management. We felt, for example, that we should not be evicting people, particularly old people who couldn't pay their rent. We agreed that we wouldn't do that. We even rejected the term *landlord* and called ourselves *landowners* (as if that made a difference), but nevertheless we felt a basic contradiction, because we needed the rent money to maintain the place and our own lifestyles, but at the same time we'd agreed never to evict an old person. Luckily it never came down to testing our convictions, since we never had a case where we had to evict an elderly person.

Landlord–TenantR elationship

The landlord–tenant relationship can be fraught with problems, since the landlord is usually far better-off than the tenant financially. This alone adds to the antagonism, to say nothing of the racial divide, since most landowners are either White or some other ethnicity than the tenant, but as tenants become increasingly the ipso facto landlords themselves through co-op ownership and condominium purchases, this aspect of the landlord–tenant nexus becomes more complicated—in some cases potentially more contentious. Take the situation with Larry: "You see, the tenants, they own this building. It's a co-op, but they got a management company that manages the building. And few good people who try to do the right thing for the building." I inquired about how he feels about his future as well as his present situation, having so many bosses/owners in the building now that it has turned into a cooperative.

As I posed the question, he looked at me with a nonchalant assuredness before answering. Larry has a large network of people, and he explained,

> We got six or seven board members, with a president and the vice president, and I get along with all of them. So no, I don't figure there will be any trouble with my job here. And even on this block, where I still take care of 13 other brownstones. B.H., you know B.H.? He was president of the NBA. Well, he lives right next door. You know T. Doe [a former mayoral candidate]? Well, he lives down the block, too. And we got two or three lady lawyers, they all live in the block. They all know me and I get along with them, too. I know these people from years, years ago that still calling me to do work. I don't have to just depend on the super job. I got like twenty, thirty people calling me. And since I be in the area, a lot of people, you know, don't want the big-time contractor to be doing the work, because they be charging crazy money, so they call me. I get the call and they come to me, and I give them the same thing as any contractor do. I give them a professional job. I been around here for years, and these people are cool here, and I do a lot of things around here. I like everybody in this whole block. In the morning, this guy told me about these white folk and people who say when they walk in this block, "Larry, you got this block so clean, you could eat off the sidewalk." And that's when they come through in the morning. He say, "If you were to ever go away tomorrow, I don't think we will never find another person to do this super job the way you do it."

As far as Flynn is concerned, the situation boils down to respect:

> There is a lot of big shots, or so-called big shots, around here. So they [Sanitation] used to sweep the sidewalks at least four times a week. The did that until somebody called and told the city they did not need to clean this area four times a week because the area is basically clean. Because of these big shots, whenever something needs to get done, they do it right away, but it's not like that in other neighborhoods, especially poor ones. In Brooklyn, it's a totally different ball game. In Brooklyn, whatever happens outside is outside. People are concerned about what going on in the building, but these people are worried about their neighborhood, too. I guess it because of who they are and who they know. And then there's people like Phillip [a co-op tenant], who is just awesome. He's the kind of tenant that doesn't really bother you. I mean other than the small things they may need; they ask you kindly and then they won't bother you. They won't throw things on the floor and make a mess. When they bring their garbage down, they recycle. And then there are people who bring their garbage down and throw boxes right on the floor with everything in the box without recycling. But it's not my job to recycle your garbage. It's that simple. There is no respect that they give to those who they feel should serve them. Now if you're a lawyer or a doctor, how difficult is it to separate your garbage by colors? It baffles me why people don't

or can't do this. But I know they refuse to do this simple task because they think it's beneath them.

"Mrs. Haughty," a young woman tenant who lives on the sixth floor of a building in the study area, does not speak to workers (or most people, for that matter) in the building. She posts handwritten signs on the community bulletin board to "pull your pants up" and frequently calls the police to report teenagers smoking pot in the lobby. On days when we both come down the elevator together and workers are taking out the garbage, she does not speak to them. Most of the men who are on garbage duty are anonymous; tenants do not know who these workers are, nor do they address them by name. Little eye contact is made, and though an occasional "good morning" can be heard from some tenants, others simply ignore these employees. This pulling of garbage is an act that subserves the "puller" to the tenant. Most garbage is picked up before tenants are awake (around 7:00 AM). Tenants are told to put out garbage the night before. What has to be reiterated is that the super no longer does most of this work but is in fact a supervisor, a foreman who delegates more and more to others. He rarely pulls the garbage detail, though he might in an extreme emergency when no other workers are available. He can be seen throwing salt or removing snow during the winter months.

What does the tenant see when the super is African American, or a Latino increasingly, or an Irishman in a building occupied by Whites? They do not necessarily see the person as foreign, though as a new crop of European supers make their way into the super occupation, perhaps they do. What does it mean to have Albanians, Macedonians, and Romanians as the emerging corps of supers in the city? (And is it true that these groups are moving into the ranks of superintendents in many parts of the city, or is that more of a demographic myth?) Historically, Irish, Jewish, African American, and Latino people were occupants of the profession, and I suspect as each group enters the city, the newest generation becomes the servant to the former.

Communities in Transition

When I first moved here, this [pointing to a building on Seventh Ave] was a shooting gallery; now it's an art gallery. And across the street used to be a wino's spot, and now it's a winery shop. On 113th Street, there used to be an old bottle gang (a place for alcoholics), and now it's a beer garden. The bodega is now a [he changes his voice to sound proper and places his hands to indicate quotation marks] "gourmet" cheese joint. I like bodegas. Sometimes I think change is good, but most of the time I don't.

—local resident sitting across from Ramona D'Yoryi Hair Salon

As neighborhoods change because of larger forces of the marketplace, where elites decide to carve up areas of the city for profit, the super is caught in the middle. As unions become more vulnerable, the super is increasingly seen as potentially redundant. This is not so in upper-class neighborhoods so much, where the super is protected by the union. But in poor neighborhoods, supers are essentially invisible minority group members of color, and so are the poor people who are consistently displaced when large power elites force them out of their neighborhoods. This is an important element in the discussion concerning changing neighborhoods. But the larger story here is about race, place, and the role geography plays in the larger social dynamic of the city.

Most of the gentrification is occurring in the poor minority communities, and this fact makes issues of race, poverty, and displacement most salient, as supers in these transitioning neighborhoods are not unionized workers and therefore much more vulnerable. This is essentially a tweak in the "canary in the coal mine" theory; it is not all supers who are potentially redundant but the Black and Latino nonunionized supers in poor neighborhoods who appear to be most vulnerable. This fact may be further tested by finding or locating the number of nonunionized supers versus the number of unionized supers in the various neighborhoods and of course by locating a larger pool of nonunion supers to talk about this issue.

Here we begin to hear supers, neighborhood residents, politicians, and others in these various communities discuss matters of race, displacement from apartments, and replacement communities. No one talked more about race issues than the supers, including Kelly, Tolton, Craig, and Flynn.

Kelly arrives at her job as super at 6:30 in the morning. She checks the boiler and then the roof and gets tenants' garbage in the correct bags, since she gets summonses for wrong recycling. Her duties are basically done after she does these things.

The garbage is the "dirty work" aspect of the super's job and is increasingly carried out by new arrivals (mostly Mexicans these days). Since the garbage is picked up around seven in the morning, many supers are still in bed. Supers are rarely seen doing this work anymore.

The various supers have different takes on the garbage situation in their buildings; while some prefer to leave the garbage to handymen staff, others take a more proactive approach to garbage pickup and recycling, which now includes e-cycling (computers, monitors, phones, VCRs, any and all electronic devices). Athena says,

> I don't like to put my trash out too early, because it looks nasty, and if I know it's a neighborhood where there's a lot of bag slashing (people who pick up cans or whatever) then I'm going to be even more careful. But if I see people are looking

> for cans (and I see this in almost every building I've worked) and it's the same person, I will ask them what they're looking for and I say to them, "Let's work out something." I will let them go to our basement; now they are in a nice, safe, warm environment, and I'll tell them to "knock themselves out," go through the bags, and take whatever they want. We used to store our garbage bags in the parking garage, and nobody was around there, and it was no harm in letting the person go through the garbage.

On one occasion, Athena noticed the person going through the bags was a man from the neighborhood who happened to be living on a fixed income, not a strange homeless person. He was quite appreciative of her allowing him to gather discarded objects in that way. Athena says,

> It was a win-win situation, because he got his cans and I got less stuff I gotta carry upstairs. So it's a beautiful thing, and it's all part of being in the neighborhood. I work the same way if I know there is someone in the neighborhood who looks for books to sell. I ask them what kind of books they looking for. I then say, "Let's go through the books together." That's the beautiful thing about being a live-in super—you really can connect with people. And those people in turn, those same folks will come back and tell you about things happening in the streets and in the neighborhood that you didn't know about. People like that keep the communication in the neighborhood open.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that dirt is "matter out of place." Dirt is relative, because if you are visiting a Japanese household, your shoes are not "dirty" unless you wear them in the house, whereas in Morocco, the shoes you wear are not dirty unless you wear them on a rug.[7] While dirty work sets the super apart from the tenants who are "high and mighty," most supers can safely say or show that they do not actually perform these duties themselves. But well-to-do tenants or co-owners still want or demand a distinction, because, as Flynn says, "They want somebody they can look down on, and the more people who fit this category, the more superior they feel."

Craig, like Flynn, noticed a distinct difference in the attitude of certain tenants once their buildings came under co-op or condo ownership:

> Well, when it was a rental, people greeted me with "hellos" and "how you doings" and all of that. They were very pleasant and everything, but after it became co-op, certain tenants, now some owners of their places—but not all of them, mind you—some tenants, especially one woman in particular, got really snooty. She started acting like I was one of them Indian untouchables. You know, she got this big-time job on Wall Street and makes six figures, and she acts like she makes a

> million. Her attitude is more like I'm her servant than a worker for all the co-op owners in the building. She's got a great big high-and-mightya ttitude.

I was curious about how Craig knew how much money she made, and though he never revealed how he got this information, I immediately thought of the garbage. Under federal law, garbage, once placed outside the home, is no longer private property but public domain, and once it reaches the basement, it is a ready source of information about tenants; letters, junk mail, tax returns, drug paraphernalia, liquor bottles—all is legal bait to be used any way the super wishes. Perused trash is no doubt where much of the identity-theft-related crimes derive.

Sociologist Ray Gold notes, "In the boiler-room the janitor sorts out the noncombustible garbage from the combustible garbage, the former to be removed by a scavenger and the latter to be burned by him in the furnace. In the course of these sorting and burning operations he wittingly or unwittingly comes across letters and other things which serve to identify the different bundles or other forms of garbage accumulation. Thus, each of the tenants is readily identified by her garbage. What the garbage reveals about the tenant over a period of time enables the janitor to make intimate judgments about her."[8] Of course, none of the supers would admit going through garbage, and all denied they ever did this, mostly because the occupational status of the super is clearly related to the "dirty" aspect of the job. As Craig said to me one day, "The super is like the mechanic: his hands are dirty, his clothes are dirty, and he's dirty." Sharif says, related to the garbage pickup, "I would never touch nobody's garbage, because that's filthy shit. You can get all kinda diseases touching garbage. [He pronounces it 'gar-bar-age.'] Only a low life would do that. I heard about the police going through garbage, but if I caught any of my staff doing that, I would fire them on the spot."

There are many other ways supers get information on tenants' lifestyles; one is by having access to apartments. New York State law requires the super to have access to all apartments. Most tenants do not actually follow this law, but when they need repairs, the super comes into their apartments nevertheless and can gain valuable information firsthand. And of course, information comes from nosy neighbors who talk about what they see or hear to the super in exchange for favors or just to gossip for its own sake. Once in the apartment, the super can peep into the lives of tenants like never before. As one tenant explained, "One day I had an electric problem in an office space where I happen to keep a lot of pornographic videos, and after the super and his helper came out, they were both grinning from ear to ear, which only could come from one thing. It certainly wasn't the joy of the work."

Displacement

One of the primary concerns facing the community in which these accounts are written is displacement, a phenomenon that has been written about for the last four decades. Residents in poor neighborhoods are most concerned about losing their homes and businesses as more affluent renters and buyers and larger, more profitable businesses take over.

I ventured over to Broadway looking for a restaurant I used to go to called La Rosita, and I found that it is no longer open and had been gone for two years. This was around 2007. Other places along Broadway were also missing: a movie theater at 99th Street, Ivy Bookstore, Broadway Lumber, a Japanese restaurant (now a McDonalds). I stopped counting the number of new banks along Broadway after seeing ten of them, and I wondered why there were so many banks until one person standing near the 112th Street Book Culture (formerly Labyrinth) said, "The banks are there to service the new condo owners—most of whom have paid millions for their new digs."

In South Harlem, the change noted by both Kelly and Sharif points to how neighborhood transmutation is swift, occurring within a decade or so. According to the last census, Harlem extended to what is now being referred to as "South Harlem," which caresses 96th Street at the low end and runs up as far as 153rd at the tip, river to river. By all accounts, this is not just a place to live in but a place where people find a great deal of their social life, maintain long-term friendships, attend church, and spend their money in small mom-and-pop stores and bodegas as well as large supermarkets, bars, dives, jazz clubs, after-hours spots, delicatessens, and restaurants. But these locations, hangouts, and neighborhood mainstays are places the local residents have sadly written off, and while the busyness and bustle is still there, the atmosphere seems changed. I asked the pedestrian what he thought of all the banks moving into the neighborhood:

> Well, you have more than just banks moving in; you also have pharmacies, too. But I think it's all about exposure, and the banks just mean more businesses. This is a well-established area [meaning wealthy]. The presence of these banks and pharmacies and the like, where they are needed or not for marketing purposes, I don't know and can't really say, but they seem to be the only businesses to survive. And especially for some of the prime real estate locations. Now some of these smaller stores, let's say the mom-and-pop-type stores, they can't compete with the rent hikes and the so called big businesses around the neighborhood.
>
> It's weird, because everybody was questioning this Wal-Mart or Walgreens store opening there on 97th, but it seems to be doing OK. I mean, I always wondered how these small stores make it, because you have to sell a lot of things to pay the rents they charge now. But if you have a bank, you can do that. Now

people, in terms of color, and race and gender, they are in my eyes the same. I know a lot of people actually . . . I know some people because I've been here for some 12 years now. But you know, people move out and away all the time. But the essence of the people, in my eyes, remains the same. What I mean by essence is that there are a coupla people down the block where the same people have been renting for a long time. These same people walk up and down the street, going down Broadway, buying things, and going back. The same faces go to the theater when it was there, the same stores, and butcher shop. This is the essence of the neighborhood. The same people year in, year out. I think most people see this part of town as family-oriented buildings and neighborhood. A good place to live. And some people joke that this is better than the east side, because on the east side, you have more snobbish types and self-centered people who are less community oriented and more personal-space oriented.

Sharif says,

I came here in November '96. And boy, that's a long time. The same place for 12 years, that's a long time. No? In the United States. Well, I guess the changes I've seen that I can put my finger on are things that may not be that important. I guess it depends on who you're talking to. Right? But some of the buildings have gone co-op or had extensive renovations, that's for sure. I remember there used to be a store right on 97th [Broadway] called the "Nobody beats the Wiz." It was on the northwest corner of 97th and it was huge store, but now it's a Walgreens. And the theatre here was torn down and the two tall buildings were built. These buildings don't go with the neighborhood, that's my personal observation, but not for the reasons most people think. You see, most of the buildings are brick and mortar and 12 to 16 stories, and these two newer buildings are at odds in this particular part of town because they are glass and steel, 25, 50 plus. We should have buildings that at least look similar to the neighborhood or at least closer in design. At least in terms of brick and features, you know, cobble stones and terra cotta. This is just me. Then also this part of the town is a family building. I think this is a family-oriented neighborhood, because I think personally we see more kids around here, and most of the apartments are not really big enough for larger families, and people, if they don't combine two apartments, they usually move out. They move to the suburbs. And this is what happens in my building and I'm sure it has happened in the area as well. Now I can tell you one change I don't miss is the Latin Club that used to be here on 96th Street, where the Chase Bank is now. I even went there a coupla times myself, but because the patrons of that club used to park their cars right where my driveway is on the weekends, Fridays and Saturdays, I couldn't park my car there and I couldn't get out when I was in . . . So it used to be a bit of headache for me. But right now, you have banks everywhere. You have Chase, Citibank, Bank of America. And this is four or five banks on one city block. I forgot, you also have Washington Mutual.

The many small and large changes Sharif spoke about suggest not only that things are not as they once were but that the very character of the people has changed as well. Displacement emerges as a central issue along with gentrification, because people are removed not only from buildings but from life in the community itself, losing friends, associations, and relationships of all kinds tethered to the decline of the housing market. I argue that in order to understand the historical importance of these communities, it is crucial to trace movements within neighborhoods as well as cultural structures. Following are notes from West-Central Harlem that speak to this issue of change over time.

Along 117th Street between Adam Powell and Malcolm X Boulevards there used to sit three tattered, broken-down shells of buildings. The entire block was mostly abandoned as well, with a few crack houses in the two structures closest to the corner. French Guyana men and a few women sat along the street next to these torn buildings, playing dominos and cards, eating, and drinking well into the winter months. Slade, a tall, bearded man with missing front teeth and a haggard face, ran his street carwash business near Malcolm X Boulevard, and drivers pulled up to have cars washed, tires shined (Armor All'd), or a body wax job for twenty bucks. Sometimes during the winter months, the people there set up a barrel burning brightly to keep themselves warm. Then construction began on the Shabazz Garden condos, and it was in fact Malcolm X's daughter who set up the venture capital to erect these new structures. The new buildings replaced the old ones that stood so many years as empty, ugly shadows on the block, and eventually every abandoned building was replaced. The street people scattered here and there. Slade went to work with a cousin in New Jersey and says he's not sure where all the others went.

Historian Kenneth Jackson's framework for understanding urban development showcases the similarities between gentrification and other urban migratory patterns throughout time. "Suburbanization"[9] provides an explanation for white flight out of urban centers during and after the 1960s while also partially providing an entry point for discussing what a return to these spaces has looked like. In some sense, it is important to ask if gentrification is truly a modern phenomenon or if it is simply a descriptor we have put on a specific kind of movement that should be interrogated alongside other migratory patterns. While the answer may seem semantic or obvious, the attention gentrification has received as a subject correlates to an understanding of American life as racially divided.

CHAPTER 8

Race, Class, and Poverty

One of the secondary areas of concern facing the community in which these accounts are written is race and class. Anthropologist John Jackson's mediation on the village of Harlem, refracted through the prism of class and race, remains fresh and one of most challenging scholarly works available ten years after its publication. Jackson does not present his Harlem as if were some captivating rhythm easily learned by breezing in for a Sunday stroll down historic boulevards; instead he portrays the community like a Romare Bearden collage, depicting the cultural intricacies, the random racial dynamics, and the deep-seated hatred and blistering resentments with a courageous assemblage of daring and brilliant scholarly suppositions. Jackson coined the term "spaces of coalescence" to describe a class-based contact zone where people are forced to interact across class lines. These locales became ethnographic field stations where he could draw a random sample of Harlem residents and record the kinds of voices he selected to tell his story. He discusses race not so much as social problem but as a particular aperture into the everyday lives of people for whom race is embedded in everyday discourse. Like Jackson, I gathered opinions at many "spots" in the neighborhood while focusing on a narrative that tries to sustain a scholarly critique to capture some of the many voices of Harlem, using the supers as mouthpieces for the changes taking place, sprinkling them throughout the book, so that Harlem residents might see themselves through the eyes of both a resident and a scholar of the city. Harlem is a metaphorical "multiplace" where race and class are displayed in all their complicated and contradictory variety. "Class stratified interactions do not necessarily have to be substantive to be important and formative," Jackson writes. "Sometimes a fleeting moment or a brief encounter with a stranger or a series of short interactions can have tremendous significance in terms of how people think about class."[1]

What this supers study does is ask some of the same questions Jackson poses in his book. For whom are these "spaces of coalescence" constructed? Who still belongs in these neighborhoods, and who is no longer welcome? What parts do class and race play in this ongoing dynamic? The ethnographer as detective tries to answer these questions by subtly capturing sentiments. Race and class have always been important factors in Harlem, but now hardcore Black Harlem residents even resent new Black homeowners. Such pent-up emotions take on a "for class purposes only" cast; poor people despise rich people with their high-priced baby strollers, overpriced coffee, and expensive, jacket-only night clubs, regardless of color. This ethnographic view helps me understand what is going on in this community I live in, as the many changes and transformations continue to alter the community I once knew, the world I once knew. When I reflect on the dominant forms of capital and social relations, the personal impact of unemployment, and the broken promises made to the children of the entire working-class group, there is a constant problematic. These are the emergent feelings emanating from below, yet they are not the same as those driving the riots of the 1960s when those rumblings reached a boiling point; these feelings are more nascent, and in part they are muted because much of the energy that was there is no longer present. The young, fearless crowd now languishes in prison or jail or remains on probation. But the rumblings persist.

The physical environment—the apartment buildings, the stores, and even the police—does nothing to elevate humanity in the ghetto (poor communities of color), and yet like a physical organism, it feeds higher social life (ranging from the slumlord to the academic). I see this daily as someone who actually lives in a working-class community that also borders what one might call poor people. But there is a variation of social experience here. In the sociological sense—let us say, ethnographic sense—it is not sexy to survive the ghetto, to come out as anything other than a partially or totally destroyed human being. Thus to some degree, the ethnographic field has evolved to something akin to a genre—only certain life forms can be written about, and the rest (the survivors) must go unacknowledged or subsumed.

When we talk about rumblings, I think about dislocation, and we have to think that real dislocation comes disguised. It is hidden in camouflage: anger in the family house, street fights on the corner, petty crimes, drug abuse. The emphasis on drug use and other vices are really secondary, since drug use and vice take place at all social strata, but there is something sexy, in an academic sense, about broken and dysfunctional Black people. To the ghetto speculator, the poor tenant is nothing more than a natural resource for him and his tribe to live off of the fat of the land, that land being ghettoized land or the poor folks living in the ghetto. The humanity of the tenant, the dignity of the tenant is of

no consequence and means nothing. If it did, then the building maintenance, the rat and roach infested tenant would not exist.

There are, of course, some tenants who do not know how to avoid succumbing to a disgraceful way of living. Life in the ghetto is complex, and for me, there is the overriding history that formed the ghetto as well as the historical underbelly of the reaction of the people in it—what they made of their lives, whether good, bad, or indifferent. And I think this is where you are trapped; the current academic landscape cannot really countenance poor Black folk who are not destroyed, let alone tell a much more complicated story about how, economically, the ghetto needs to exist. Race is a central issue along with class, because the people most affected are poor Black and Latinos, the working poor, and the ones moving to displace them are mostly upper-middle-class whites, Blacks, and Latinos; rich gays from downtown; and wealthy Europeans.

There is a long pattern of residential segregation that dates back decades. The poverty is more concentrated in the areas under study because of the presence of large numbers of public housing projects that now sit adjacent to multimillion-dollar properties. According to New York Housing Authority statistics, at least 500,000 people live in 334 developments consisting of 178,896 apartments in 2,600 buildings on 2,400 acres of land.[2] Much of that property is located in prime real estate in Manhattan and Harlem in particular. At least that is the situation now, but sooner, I believe, rather than later, as real estate interest grows, this will mean the end of public housing as we know it—a point made by Craig a while back. But he is not the only one who has been asking the big question: how long will million-dollar condominium and cooperative owners tolerate poor people living next door? Examples of this change already exist.

Take, for instance, an interview I had with the mother of a young man associated with the Writers Crew Project that Bill Kornblum and I started back in the 1990s, who I met while conducting research on public housing in East Harlem.[3] Mrs. James is in her sixties and lives not very far from where she raised her boys in a six-story building on 102nd Street and Second Avenue. Today, the same plot where the public housing sat is now a condominium building. How did it happen? She told the story: "I lived in the apartment building for 22 years with my two sons until we got notice that the building was being sold and that we had to move. They gave us applications for a building down the street across from Metro North housing, and there was a waiting list, but we got in and now live there. But the public housing I once had for all that time, I lost along with all the other families that lived there. This is no more." Mrs. James is quiet and unassuming, and I probed a bit to ask about the circumstances of her and the other families having to leave. She said that the building was deliberately allowed to decay through lack of basic maintenance, which gave those who wanted tenants out an excuse. "They wanted us out of that building and

they got us out. It was their way of saying, 'Move on,' because they wanted that place for other reasons. The stopped maintaining the building, I guess so that we would get so frustrated that we would leave easy. You can see now what's there now, and it's not public housing. It's a condo of some kind, and I don't see many Black people coming outta those doors living there."

The block along 102nd Street is indeed changed, and the buildings in that block are now condos and co-ops. The story of what will happen to public housing is one that will be closely watched over the years, since Harlem has a large number of public housing projects that real estate developers have their eyes on. The other areas of interest are those in attractive locations such as Chelsea and the Long Island City waterfront. It is no secret that the budget for public housing in New York is in the red—which is to say, there is no money coming from city, state, or federal governments to maintain the vast stock of public housing. What will happen in the long term? This is a very important question, and perhaps answers can be found by looking at the case of the Cabrini Green and Robert Taylor public housing projects in Chicago. When these large public housing edifices were demolished, they were replaced with middle-class housing, and the vast majority of tenants in those projects were displaced. Mrs. James and her sons are a prime example of displacement of the poor in public housing. The problem poverty poses is not simply about policy or redistribution but about tangible aspects of community, citizenship, and human dignity, as sociologists like William J. Wilson, Jack Katz, and others have shown in their work. Furthermore, by defying conventional categorization of the poor, one must rethink the basic questions: "What exactly is poverty and who is poor?" Several writers have asked this question, and the answer revolves around our notion of what it means to be a human being and the way we relate to the "other," or those who are different than us.

In *American Apartheid*, sociologist Douglass Massey and geographer Nancy Denton see spatial segregation as the key missing factor in explanations of the enduring poverty of the African American community in the United States: "Our fundamental argument is that racial segregation—and its characteristic institutional form, the black ghetto—are the key structural factors responsible for the perpetuation of Black poverty in the United States."[4] Thus segregation offers the missing term in equations that had focused on culture, racism, welfare, and economics as the primary factors. The authors handle each of the latter factors separately, offering an explanation of the deficiencies they see inherent in each argument.

Like Massey and Denton, Eli Anderson and William J. Wilson dismiss the "culture of poverty" thesis in favor of positing racism as a primary factor: "We join earlier scholars in rejecting the view that poor urban Blacks have an autonomous 'culture of poverty' that explains their failure to achieve socio-economic

success in American society. We argue instead that residential segregation has been instrumental in creating a structural niche within which a deleterious set of attitudes and behaviors—a culture of segregation—has arisen and flourished. Segregation created the structural conditions for the emergence of an opposition culture that devalues work, schooling, and marriage, and that stresses attitudes and behaviors that are antithetical and often hostile to success in the larger economy."[5] However, Wilson and others, including sociologist Loïc Wacquant, argue that racism alone cannot explain the persistence of poverty; racism must be bolstered by other structural factors: "Residential segregation is the institutional apparatus that supports other racially discriminatory processes and binds them together into a coherent and uniquely effective system of racial subordination."[6]

Massey and Denton agree with Wilson that "the structural transformation of the urban economy undermined economic supports for the Black community during the 1970s and 1980s," and they claim that "in the absence of segregation, these structural changes would not have produced the disastrous social and economic outcomes observed in inner cities during these decades"; thus "it was segregation that confined the increased deprivation to a small number of densely settled, tightly packed, and geographically isolated areas."[7]

The authors also argue that although the flight of the Black middle class from segregated areas may have exacerbated the level of poverty in these areas, even in the absence of such "out-migration" the "disastrous social and economic outcomes" would have occurred nonetheless. Neither does the welfare state suffice to produce such deleterious results. Although the authors agree that "federal welfare policies are linked to the rise of the urban underclass," they hold that welfare does not cause the other effects that are often ascribed to it—that is, discouraging employment and harming the family—but rather, "welfare payments were only harmful to the well-being of groups that were residentially segregated" by creating "a segregated environment in which welfare dependency was the norm, leading to the inter-generation transmission and broader perpetuation of urban poverty."[8] It is also important to note that the authors argue that Black segregation was not voluntary, nor the outcome of market forces, but the result of deliberate actions motivated by racism and the actions and inactions of the central and local governments.

These sociologists bolster their claims with a copious amount of historical materials that depict the process by which segregation took place, as well as statistical information bolstering claims that spatial segregation occurred to an extreme degree. They begin their historical analysis by noting that whites and Blacks had not always been as separate from each other as they had become. However, this process began with turn-of-the-century industrialization, which produced the migration of African Americans from rural areas to urban areas,

and from the South to the North, the latter being motivated by a desire to escape racist persecution.

However, as the population of African Americans living in northern cities increased, tensions between Black and white residents arose, with whites using the tools of violence and discrimination in housing markets to force Blacks out of white neighborhoods and keep them out. The result was the formation of the "urban ghetto," which, "constructed during the first half of the twentieth century and successively reinforced thereafter, represents the key institutional arrangement ensuring the continued subordination of Blacks in the United States." *Ghetto* is defined as "a set of neighborhoods that are exclusively inhabited by members of one group, within which virtually all members of that group live."[9]

Later developments in the twentieth century only served to deepen segregation. The post-WWII economic boom led to the expansion of cities, creating the "sprawling decentralized metropolises" that would later be characterized as "chocolate city, vanilla suburbs," reinforcing segregation. The suburbanization of the 1950s brought with it a massive divergence of federal funds away from the inner city and into the suburbs, leading to urban decay.

The later urban renewal of the 1970s, also termed "negro removal," saw a rise in public housing, which Massey and Denton call a "federally sponsored second ghetto." They summarize these developments by saying, "By 1970, after two decades of urban renewal, public housing projects in most large cities had become Black reservations, highly segregated from the rest of society and characterized by extreme isolation."[10] The authors also note that following the Civil Rights Movement, legislative achievements such as the Fair Housing Act, and record reductions in Black poverty, conditions should have been ripe for desegregation to occur. However, the institutionalization of the urban ghetto and continued discrimination in the housing market, plus economic stagnation, ensured that this did not occur.

In addition to structural factors inherent in this process of "hypersegregation," a set of internal dynamics, constituting a feedback loop between individual and collective actions, serves to reinforce neighborhood decay: "In the face of persistent neighborhood disorder, residents come to distrust their neighbors and to look upon them as threats rather than as sources of support or assistance. Residents modify their routines and increasingly stay indoors; they minimize their time on the streets and limit their contacts outside of close friends and family. This withdrawal only promotes further disorder by lowering the number of watchful neighbors in public places and by undermining the community's capacity for collective action. By provoking withdrawal, disorder weakens informal processes of social control that operate to maintain a neighborhood's stability."[11]

The concentration of poverty, and the social ills that come with it—crime, family disintegration, welfare dependency—makes communities increasing vulnerable to economic decline, which leads to the formation of an "underclass," a word fraught with concern, since it lumps together drug users, welfare recipients, public housing tenants, and criminals all under one stereotypical umbrella. The term is basically pejorative; nevertheless, the combination of racial segregation and increased poverty causes neighborhoods to be fragile and vulnerable. The intergeneration persistence of a class of people left out of the mainstream leads to a "culture of segregation" with an oppositional identity, perpetuating the plight of those who literally have no place to go.

East Harlem Community

I stopped near the tracks on Park Avenue on a windy afternoon in mid-February 2008. This is an area once known as the "forbidden zone" for all but those closely linked to the Spanish Harlem community, because it was gang ridden, territorially protected, and dangerous. By the end of the 1960s, it was becoming an embattled area of desertification. I was living only a few blocks away across Fifth Avenue at this time and personally witnessed this transformation: landlords abandoning properties or torching their buildings to get the insurance money, drug dealers selling in vacant apartments, junkies nodding on street corners, and new residents nowhere to be found.

By the 1990s, new life had come to the area, and by the early aught years (2000–2003), many of the abandoned buildings had been razed and new townhouses and brownstones were replacing the old tenements. For instance, along 117th Street, between First and Second Avenue, I watched new buildings sprout up, many of which needed repairs only a few years later because of shoddy construction and poor materials. Several men, mostly Black and Latino, sat and played dominos on this street before the construction of these new buildings. These buildings are what would eventually become the location where I met with Allan, the young super on 117th Street and Madison Avenue.

These men would sit in the early afternoon talking and drinking and having fun playing their game. On this day, I saw two fashionably dressed young women walk down the street: one Black, one white or perhaps Latina. They strolled passed the men, who were now on the sidewalk with their backs leaning against the fence that separated them from a concreted area. I went over and asked the men what they thought of the new neighborhood.

The first man was well dressed, about fifty or so, and looked around for a minute or two before speaking. His left hand hung limply by his side, and he puffed on a hand-rolled cigarette with the right. Finally, he echoed a familiar refrain: "You can't fight progress, right? You can hate it, but you can't fight it.

It's like my shadow. There you see it [he points to his shadow on the concrete]. I might not like my shadow, but I can't do anything about it."

The other men nodded in agreement.

The second man wore jeans and boots, though the weather was not cold, and looked pensive. He had a wine bottle in his left hand, which he placed underneath his chair. "When the rich people said they wanted this land, this place [East Harlem], there wasn't a damn thing we could do about it. We organized and protested, at least some of us did, but Giuliani made it his priority, can I say that? Made it his *priority* to push the poor people out of these neighborhoods. He even said he wanted Manhattan to be a place for the middle and upper class with no poor people in it before his term was over as mayor."

The third was a Latino man in his forties who didn't wait for a question. He blurted out, "Yeah, when that mayor [Giuliani] said he would get rid of all the casitas around here, what he was doing was setting up this land for the rich real estate guys to take it over. Casitas are part of our [Puerto Rican] culture. Poor people's culture. How many rich people do you know who live in a casita?"

Many of the casitas were destroyed, leaving some Latinos homeless as they moved out of these self-built shanties. Many had been attractive tiny houses that had stood on city and private lands for several decades. If homelessness is a process, this is the beginning stage of it, and it helps answer the question of who is most likely to become homeless, as if it wasn't already a known fact. The third man opined, "We couldn't do nothing about that either [the removal of casitas] but protest—but it did no good, because the rich people wanted the land where the casitas were standing—so the first to go was the green spaces, then the casitas, and now all the old housing is being torn down and renovated or something, and whatever goes up we can't afford, so we're next to go."

A man was passing out flyers on the street near where these men were seated. The flyer read,

> THE RENT STRIKE MEETING FOR ALL OF HARLEM THURSDAY 13 DECEMBER 2007 AT 7PM NO DEW, NO RAIN, NO PAIN, NO GAIN, A THREE YEAR BOYCOTT OF HARLEM. HARLEM IS BEING SOLD TO THE SETTLERS OF PLYMOUTH ROCK AND STOLEN FROM THE SURVIVORS OF THE GREAT MIDDLE PASSAGE. 70 MILLION DOLLARS IS BEING SPENT IN HARLEM EVERY WEEK [U.S. CENSUS]

We all read the flyer and then looked at each other. The first man said, "Yeah, I believe this is true, all the politicians have sold us out. You can't name one that has done any good for Harlem." I relate these conversations as if they occurred in an orderly manner, but that is just the opposite of what happened. All these

men spoke with passion about what was happening to their community, and I could not keep up with them. They broke into song at one point, and another one started smoking a joint. A woman walked by who obviously knew the men, and after haranguing one man, she tried to punch the Latino man and then pushed his chair over. After he got up, the men started talking about women.

In 2014, an unexplained explosion blew up a building one apartment house away from where we stood, between 117th and 118th Streets and Park Avenue. I don't know if the men I had been talking to had friends in that building or knew people who lived there.

Allan: East Harlem

Allan told me about the neighborhood he came into after being hired for the super job five years ago. This particular stretch of East Harlem was completely abandoned 25 years ago. My field notes from that time reveal how much has changed.

In the summer of 1997, I went back to the projects—this time to Johnson, located at 1844 Lexington Avenue, because I found out the young girl who was known as "Precious" was staying there with a friend who took over the mother's apartment unbeknownst to the Housing Authority. She knew gang members who were involved in a murder case I was working on with Elsie Chandler, the lawyer at the Neighbors Defenders Office. I was happy to be in the Johnson Projects, because I had a number of contacts there, including Rasheem, a young boxer I videotaped with filmmaker John Stack. He later fought Jab Judah in a street-sponsored amateur bout. Judah would later become a world champion. Rasheem lost the fight, but I mentored him for a time and met his mother and his eight brothers and sisters. I visited his mother who told me about this girl Precious, though she didn't know much about her whereabouts. She told me Rasheem was in training for an upcoming bout. She said "those girls," including Precious, were "too fast," and she didn't want any of her kids involved in the street. She trying to keep her kids away from that "element." I was back in the projects the next day to meet a teenage girl, Junetta, who I knew from the Clinton projects (located between 104th and 110th Street) She's in college now, trying to find a part-time job, and she asked if I knew of any summer jobs. I told her to call me, and she said she would, but after the 25th because she had a conference or something that would help her pay the rent.

"You know these kids around here are into the same stupid games they've always been into. And I don't know if you're a Crip or a Blood or whatever, it's stupid. Did you hear they drive around with their light off at night and if another driver blinks their lights to tell them their lights are out, they follow that person and shoot them? Is that stupid or what?" She said she didn't see

anybody in Clinton doing anything positive, and she didn't know Precious but did have a friend named Kee-Kee in Metro North who hung out with some Bloods in her project. "I know so many murders around here, I just shake my head. I had a friend, Tootsie, who was killed last year over something ridiculous; I can't wait to get back to school, because the madness out here is outta control." On Sunday, I went back to 110th Street and Lexington and got the lead on a kid named "Too Short." I met up with his mother and she looked a bit weary. Her appearance suggested heroin use, and her daughter, who is growing up into a fine young woman, was very nice but didn't say a word.

Returning to the present, I ask Allan about the neighborhood since he has been super here.

> I basically know just about everybody around this neighborhood. I know most of the supers around here because we get together, and between us, we know each other. I hear some people saying things, mostly negative things about Spanish Harlem and the Black community and stuff like that, and I can say I do like the way Harlem looks now because of the mixing. And I believe that's the way it's supposed to be. A mixed neighborhood. I think the new developments, the new buildings, parks, even the police department looks like it's getting better [the local precinct is one block south on Park Avenue from his building]. I heard from one of my friends that they gonna take down the Pathmark up there.

The Pathmark supermarket Allan refers to is located on Lexington and 125th Street, which has been a major street drug market for decades going back to the 1960s. Allan folds his arms, leans back in his chair, and continues:

> I heard the city owns that space and somebody put up a bid for the land, and they took that and they're gonna take the building next to it as well. They say it's going to be high riser so . . . I think that's the only thing that needs to change in this neighborhood, because I don't even go to that area. Well, it's not that bad, but there is still something that needs to be changed over there. I know the area used to be heavy junkie territory for years. I think I'm sure it will be more high-rise-type structures over there. I see the community changing for the better, of course, and that's for sure.

Civility is a fragile, dynamic thing, especially in an environment as racially volatile as American society. This civility is a temporary intercourse held together by smoke and mirrors, glue and spit, part conflictual but held at bay by laws and etiquette. Civility is the also about conflict, because one cannot exist without the other. The idea of civility in this next section starts with community residents who see the world through eyes of wisdom and have been around the neighborhood for many years.

The Forgotten Zone

> I never heard nobody say they wanted white girls to move into the neighborhood. I never heard nobody say they wanted white boys to move into the neighborhood. They never said, "We don't want no niggahs or spics or Mexicanos in this neighborhood." The landlord just says, "You know, the rents will be higher very soon."
>
> —Latino man standing on an East Harlem Street corner

Traditionally, the concept of "community" or "neighborhood" refers to a relatively small and socially similar area of between two thousand and five thousand people. Many studies have been able to approximate neighborhoods through use of census tract data, because these data contain important information on key community characteristics. Census tract data does not always fit with sociologically meaningful communities, however, since the data are governmentally defined. One way of circumventing these limitations is to draw a map of neighborhood areas and ask people if local neighborhood boundaries correspond to the map. If the person's view of a community does not overlap with the census boundaries, that information can be used to reformulate the definition of neighborhoods. I simply asked supers, porters, and others in the community and working in buildings what constituted their neighborhood and created maps based on that information.

A smaller area is what many refer to as a block cluster or block group, which is a two- or three-block area with anywhere from one hundred to one thousand residents. Though the density and size of the block clusters vary, the census bureau does collect data at the block-group level, so information can be gleaned from this source. I should mention that the smallest ecological level usually identified in research such as this is the face-block, or the small cluster of homes and apartments facing the street on one's block. This unit represents the small social world of adjacent neighbors and is often classified as the "micro" neighborhood.[12]

Sharif, Frank, and Craig told me how they saw the boundaries of their neighborhoods. When I asked Sharif where his neighborhood started and ended, he told me this:

> Well, I guess in terms of geography, and if you mean my neighborhood, it would be from 106th to 72nd Street. It's wide, my neighborhood, and it's the place I personally walk around, or sometimes I drive around, where I might go to a certain store. I usually like to walk on Broadway. I don't know why, but I just like Broadway. I like the local parks, diners, and Riverside Park, I should say. This is basically the upper west side, and that's what I call it. I don't know an official name, but I like to refer to my neighborhood as the upper west side. Maybe there is an

> official name like Tribeca, the Village, Hell's Kitchen, or some neighborhood that has a distinct name or geographical area or distinct blocks. But if there's a name for this particular area [98th Street and West End Ave], I don't know what it is.

In this neighborhood of South Harlem, there is another community that is totally forgotten, and it exists in the study area from 96th to 125th Street. These are people who live under the streets, the tunnel residents who are literally on the bottom of society. This is the community of homeless people who live underground at the end point of the geography at 125th Street, because this is where the tunnel starts and extends downtown under Riverside Park adjacent to the Hudson River. There is a high fence there now, but when I first ventured there back in 1989, no fence existed and a large homeless settlement lived there. I describe this part of the geography because these are forgotten people in the city and the real estate they occupy is relevant to the discussion. And as Glaucon, the "Lord of the Tunnel," said to me in one of our many discussions, "Social value in our society is based primarily on property or labor, and if you have neither to offer, you are so fucked." I also have some connection with the supers along this corridor, as Riverside Park is the above-ground playground for residents along the drive. I spent time with the Lord of the Tunnel picking up books from supers along Riverside Drive. Following are some notes from the time.

Glaucon knows the supers well, and though we only see one of them, they greet like old friends. Glaucon hands the guy something I can't see, and he asks me to help with the books the super gave him. There are too many to carry, and he goes to get a shopping cart he's stashed behind a building. Looking at the cart, I notice it has only three wheels, and I wonder how this thing is going to work. As if anticipating my puzzlement, he explains that everyone thinks it's broken, and then he goes over and retrieves a fourth wheel hidden in a tree. I laugh at this, and he says, "See, when people see the cart, they just throw up their hands because they can't use it. They leave it alone, and so I'm able to save it for myself."

The underground is a strange place (or space, if you want to get technical). It is a forgotten zone. It's not like any other place, because it is not really a place to be lived in. It is not an apartment or a house, though we know there are some people who live in bunkers down there. These places are makeshift homes and not really "theirs," because these are public places, and Amtrak can kick them out anytime. Some of the tunnel residents do say things such as "I am not really homeless but just temporally without shelter," but they are really homeless, because this place is not really a home. A few structures are built from scratch, especially Cubano Arms, a Frank Gehry–type construction similar to the casitas in East Harlem but smaller and made up of found materials—everything from

cardboard to tin, wood, tarpaulin, and even newsprint. When I peeked in one day before its inhabitants were around, I saw an old mattress, newspapers, and what looked like flower pictures on the walls. I did not stay long for fear of being caught, and I quickly made my way up the tunnel.

Another point is that these places are unlike an apartment leased to an individual in that anyone can enter, for the most part, whenever they wish. Of course, you cannot just go into specific places people live in without facing resistance, some permission is usually required, but it is not like in a building where even the police would have to serve warrants and the like (at least until the "no knock laws" were passed). Here in the tunnel, police can enter without warrants. All this brings us to the issue of full citizenship rights for people who are propertyless and whose labor is no longer needed. They do not have the same rights because they do not pay rent. They are essentially vagabonds and vagrants, as James S. Duncan writes:

> In a society such as ours, whose organization is based on individual property rights, a poor person will be viewed as a problem for the group controlling the area in which he lives. He possesses little property and hence has little stake in the existing order which functions primarily to protect property and ensure that orderly market relations take place. The tramp possess all of the same problems for the controlling group that the poor local person does but these problems are magnified as he, being an itinerant, has even less stake in the area. Not only does he lack property but he rarely has ties with local residents. Thus the tramp feels no obligation to maintain the moral order and furthermore his mobility makes it difficult to force him to comply with it. The locals view the tramp as a threat and do their best to drive him away.[13]

Where will the poor live, those who work for the elites? What will happen to the supers in the future of the city? Will condominiums and cooperatives rule the city landscape? Will the poor be housed in the Sowetos of the urban cities? (Sowetos are large urban areas or townships southwest of Johannesburg, South Africa.) When I was in South Africa, I went to a place called Guguletho, a township where all the Black workers employed in the center of Cape Town lived. Every evening after work, these workers were packed into small buses called jitneys and driven back along super highways to the townships. The poor are always being pushed from the center. Philosopher Cornel West once said that our present culture has elevated market values such as money, power, and greed to the center of our society and pushed nonmarket values such as compassion, caring, and love to the periphery.[14] This is happening in communities that are undergoing gentrification and displacement; people are being pushed to the periphery, out of the city, out of state, and out of mind.

CHAPTER 9

Working in the Field

I laid the groundwork for this book by describing a roving ethnography used in community studies to capture the variety of life presented by the physical boundaries, different census tracts, and other unique landmarks that make up the neighborhoods presented here. Roving ethnography, or multisite ethnography, involves moving from place to place doing fieldwork and observing as a participant. In doing community research, the desired outcome is a balanced picture of community life. My method is simple. Go out into the community and talk to people—talk to porters, listen to supers opine, and gather notes on life with tenants to set up an in situ account of the community by placing side by side a series of notes and sketches of everyday life and detailed context of community areas I have been documenting over the last few decades.

I consider all the material collected as journal-entry fodder: hallway discussions, letters, pamphlets, bulletin board messages, hallway building litter and street detritus, diary notes, interviews, wall and sidewalk graffiti, tenant meeting presentations, head notes, jotted notes, phone messages, emails, debriefing sessions with student assistants, a gentrifier's journal. I also held a class seminar about supers and the world of work at my university that was recorded, and notes were drawn from those discussions. Most helpful in this regard is the guidance of sociologists Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw.[1]

I did not concentrate equally on all supers in this study, and I spent more time with some than others, in some cases just because of sheer proximity. Craig lives only a block from my apartment, and we constantly bump into each other; Sharif is a subway stop away; Frank is a bus ride east on 116th Street; and Tolton lives seven blocks north on a street I regularly travel. Though I spent time in Kelly's neighborhood—grocery shopping, going to the post office, eating in small restaurants, bar hopping—the interview with her was conducted by a student during the first years of the study. During the last years of the study (2012–14), I interviewed Allan, Tolton, Flynn, Athena, and Larry. Casual

conversations with supers in my own building; meetings with supers along Riverside Drive with a homeless man; interviews with the supers in the consortium in which I was a junior partner; talks with Mr. Henry, the super I first apprenticed with in the first building I lived in after returning to Harlem after high school; and a few others took place before the study was conceived and are part of my lifelong journaling of events in these various neighborhoods. I have had an ongoing relationship with many of the participants in this study as part of my ethnographic overlap technique.

This autoethnographic component is important because of the need to include my personal account of buying property and my roles as super apprentice, super, and landlord. Once initial informants/contacts were found—which included my main informant, a porter who had been part of another study twenty years earlier, along with three other supers—a set of questions were devised, put to memory, and asked of all who were part of the super's universe, including doormen, handymen, hired assistants, and tenants. Supers also interact with people in the street, such as local residents, teenagers, drug addicts, street sex workers, police officers, detectives, homeless vagrants, and other assorted street characters.

The same questions were asked of everyone and used as a reference to ensure the same responses were solicited from all. Most of the conversations began informally to set people at ease, and once rapport was established, the conversation was given a certain direction and the informant would comment. Sometimes long-winded answers morphed into full-fledged life stories, and therefore some accounts are longer than others. But the life story is what I wanted most, and vivid and frank accounts about family life, early childhood memories, explosive episodes, births, deaths, successes, or failures made the effort worthwhile. Yet, in spite of skillful questioning, some people were skeptical and did not want to answer certain questions, others simply said "no thanks" and did not want to participate, while still others did not want their families interviewed. I realize some of the quotes from one super may seem unrepresentative, but having interviewed ten supers, I can say that one super's response is basically what all of them told me, and since every building has a super, it is easy to ask your own super if what is presented here is accurate. All these interviews took place at various times depending on when I could arrange a session and wherever happened to be convenient: restaurants, bars, parks, on the street, building basements.

Ethnography is the practiced study of diversity within a society in order to understand it better. I like the ethnographic approach and it is my preferred style because the tools it provides allow you to tease out processes that account for certain outcomes. It allows you to see the world as other people see it and understand how definitions of situations are arrived at and how these

definitions result in certain patterns of behavior. I have been underground in sewers, in drug havens and crack spots, in derelict buildings, and in underground passageways five levels below Grand Central Terminal, and I have lived in public housing, peered into houses of prostitution, shot dice with con men, and spent time in prison, yet I have never experienced in any of those settings a lack of humanness. In order to get into the closed circles of various underground populations, I had to use both diplomacy and subterfuge, but none of my strategies would have been successful without the help of people who felt the need to tell their stories.

And so it is in the present case with superintendents. Scholar Hakim Hasan phrased it eloquently when he once told me, "There is a human need not to be relegated to anonymity." Put more simply, people want to tell their stories, or at least I found this to be the case in most circumstances. Perhaps it is about personal ego, but people will eventually tell you what you want to know if you stay with them long enough. It also depends on how you meet the contact/informant and who introduces you to them. The initial informant usually tells the person what you (as an ethnographer) are all about, and as long as you promise anonymity, you can get the information you want. The city is full of dispossessed people, military veterans, disaffected teenagers, and beggars alike. I have seen whole communities such as the South Bronx and the Lower East Side literally decimated by fires in order to make winners of real estate companies and certain landlords. After observing the city for so many years, as visitor and resident, I have seen many different parts of the city ebb and flow. I've watched people change and develop new customs and institutions, standards of life, sentiments and interests. In short, I've seen New York's passionate city lights dimmed but always relit by new generations who reinvigorate it with massive nomadic movements as they sweep anew across the metropolitan terrain.

What I find most interesting and stimulating is being an observing social scientist in situations in which I am fully engaged. I intended to document the pivotal place occupied by supers in "the making of a neighborhood" and the tensions that arise from the gentrification that has overtaken the communities highlighted here since the beginning of the aught years. The work presented here was meant to speak with and for the real individuals who live in neighborhoods and communities, listening to their concerns and recording their stories as tenants, residents, and workers who make up the neighborhood. This book speaks of New York, but it also speaks from New York and for New York. In this account, you have several supers describing their work, their social world, their family, their neighborhood, along with how they develop relationships with people living right in the middle of changing neighborhoods. For my own neighborhood, I have notes from journals going back many years, which I have inserted into the body of the text. The interviews took place on a daily, weekly,

or monthly basis, and at times several months went by before I met a super on the street, sat down on a stoop, ate a meal with a super in a restaurant, drank a beer in a bar, reminisced on a park bench or in a community garden, or just chatted in his or her building.

I have spent years on many streets talking with tenants, landlords, politicians, teenagers, and tourists—to people in the neighborhoods: the barbershop owner, the cleaners' proprietress, tourist guides, visitors, oldest residents, community organizers, teachers, garbage workers, and others living and working in the neighborhoods. The West Harlem community is where I live, and I chose to include my own building and experiences of living in this neighborhood and how this impacted the study.

I initially tried to find a super by approaching the man who occupied that position in my building; he's Dominican and 35 years old, with a wife and child, and he has been a super for more than ten years in a building I've lived in for thirty years. I wanted to know how he got the job in the first place, since I had known two other supers before him, both of whom were Latinos. But after some consideration, I decided not to include him as a contact person, a sponsor, or what is normally called an informant. The word *informant* has a negative connotation, and I refrain from using it in most circumstances. I asked the super a few general questions about the profession and his helpers and interviewed one of his assistants, a Dominican man who did a lot of the work in the building. In my search, I wanted to find a woman super, and I had the good fortune to meet Laura Kenny, a student at the University of Michigan whom I met when I gave a lecture there. Laura became my research assistant introduced Kelly to the study and later interviewed her. Kelly satisfied two important criteria: first, she was a woman, and I knew the occupation was stacked in males' favor and a woman would represent a different point of view; second, she was a super who managed a building she later owned in a South Harlem neighborhood, another criterion critical to the study.

Originally, the main requirement of the research was that the person had to be a full-time supervising super responsible for an entire building of at least eight to ten stories with an elevator, and I wanted the super to have staff, but I knew a small building would not require a staff. Yet, regardless of whether the person was a full-time super or not, I basically wanted someone I could follow around and observe in his or her daily routine. All this proved unrealistic, except the last part about shadowing the person, since it was difficult to satisfy all the other criteria. Since the super/owner was represented by my own experience and that of my former consortium partners, I did not actively search for this kind of person.

In order to locate supers in every community, I had to journey to the various communities—all of which I've either lived in before or know quite well

because of my ethnographic work and living in the city since my teenage years. All this was my ideal type of situation. I went to each neighborhood asking people where I might find supers willing to take part in the study. I described the narrative and the methodological practice of participant observation and the way fieldwork is accomplished. The field note entries are basically field episodes that are usually presented in a truncated form, where I give an account for the entries before they are read, then a brief account after or a comment that either explains the entry or provides a further account of what the entry meant. However, in this volume, the journal entries are running accounts and stories in themselves, where each accounting of an event is given full range for the reader to assess, critique, or otherwise lull over for one's own edification. In this way, the entries become a part of the story within the story.

Epilogue

A walk through these neighborhoods unveils a village of contradictions. You are likely to find only a few abandoned buildings and a handful of homeless people these days, and you are more likely to see children playing, boys talking to girls as they pass, watchful adults standing about, and wealthy brownstone stoop-sitters only a few blocks from working-poor folk barbecuing in a public housing project down the street. The area has many faces: women in burkas, doctors and grocers, taxi drivers, housewives, lawyers, older kids shooting dice against concrete walls, street-corner hustlers peddling wares. Out of sight now are crack houses, freak dens, and small-time prostitution and petty pimping, once noticeable in the area. This is a community of families, hardworking church-goers, dedicated mothers and fathers, street-corner kids, and Africans, Mexicans, Ecuadorians, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans struggling to find a way to make the American Dream a reality. By all accounts, Harlem is not just a place to live but a place where people find a great deal of their social life, maintain long-term friendships, attend church, send kids to school, and spend their money in many of the last small mom-and-pop stores as well as large supermarkets, bars, juke joints, jazz clubs, after-hours spots, and restaurants. But all this is changing, and one quickly notices, for example, the increasing number of mosques scattered about the neighborhood. These houses of worship have, over the years, become icons of attraction for tourists who peep from the outside but never actually see inside because so few are Muslims. But the Black churches get thousands of visitors every year as tour buses line up and down the streets on Sundays. I write about the lives and opinions of working men and women to reveal the passion and realism of their lives, in part because I consider myself an inside observer, and much of the work is done with the implicit approval of those working folk who make up the trades, particularly the superintendent profession. Supers are

euphemistically called "jacks-of-all-trades," since they are linked with plumbers, electricians, painters, and carpenters on a daily basis.

One of the first jobs I had in New York was with a superintendent in the building I where I was staying. I have been associated with supers in one way or another all my life, as has almost every renting family in the city. There are 30,000 members in the local 32BJ of the Services Workers Union in the city, made up of doormen, supers, handymen, and porters. The exact number of nonunionized supers is not stated, but regardless of the number, superintendents are an essential component in the life of most New Yorkers, and they play a great role in the formation of relationships and networks within the neighborhood. Yet, no study in social science has focused on them. The merit of this book, first and foremost, is in closing this knowledge gap and breaking the analytical silence.

I tried to provide an in-depth analysis of the daily life of superintendents by utilizing an ethnographic approach in four uptown areas in New York City, and because of the sites chosen to conduct fieldwork, it was possible to look at the intersections between race, class, and gender and at the same time focus on the issue of community building in multicultural neighborhoods, the matter of immigration, and finally a concern that has become crucial in New York City in the past decade: displacement and its consequences. My theory of supers being analogous to the "canary in the coal mine," in the sense that they see the warning signs of neighborhood change, was only partially born out in the study. I tried to flag the changes under way and the consequences for the people living in the buildings and populating those streets. To a certain extent, supers function as "quasi-landlords," de facto landlords, or landlord flunkies to the degree that they are responsible for the day-to-day operation of a commodity (apartment building or property) that they do not own.

This is complex sociological (nay, ethnographic) terrain and could well lead to new insights, because the thousands of apartment buildings form an intricate web of social and economic relations that define, to a large degree, the cultural character of the community. This is also a meditation on what "real estate" ownership means in a community and how "feudal cosmopolitanism" has shaped Harlem and, frankly, the rest of the city. I argue that as supers go, so does the neighborhood, or at least for the poorer residents of most gentrified neighborhoods, who are displaced. Superintendents themselves are being replaced because as those neighborhoods become gentrified, supers in poorer areas, especially nonunionized supers, become redundant.

Harlem is a complex, dynamic reality, and it was at one time historically and spiritually the most significant Black community, the territorial nexus of America's African Diaspora. All or most of that has changed over the past few decades. Of the 480,000 Harlem residents enumerated in the 2000 census, less

than half are Blacks, close to 200,000 are Latinos, and Whites make up close to 20 percent. Despite Harlem's past reputation as the world's best-known Black community, its social geography has always been schizophrenic—as much a state of mind as a place. For more than a hundred years, Harlem has been in constant flux, ever changing and evolving. Blacks along Strivers Row and Lenox Terrace, White academics on Riverside Drive, pockets of Italian mafia on the East Side, the piss poor in the center, and regular everyday working poor scattered throughout have all claimed Harlem as home. Shifts, movements, and changes are constant in Harlem. Uncomfortable conflicts exist among different social groups and social credentials, creating pain, anxiety, anger, and resentment that sometimes shatter relationships but at the same time create new ones. For many, Harlem remains controversial, from its confused political leadership to the ethnic gumbo of hardcore residents who have felt betrayed, trapped, despised, forgotten, exploited, and now disposable. A new middle class has arrived—a mix of Black, White, Latino, Asian, and gay gentrifiers who are returning like so many prodigal sons and daughters.

The supers in this study are not new arrivals but have been part of the communities for a long time, and that is why their stories are told here. They are part of the social ecology of the neighborhood, and they have been all but invisible, like the maids, dishwashers, and garbage collectors in the city, who are seen yet unseen, and this book is an attempt to see them as human beings in a city that pays certain people "no mind." The most recent "African American" arrivals who are paid "no mind" hail from Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Ghana, and other African nations. Ironically, they resemble the settled population in their shades of color but are different culturally, and more conservative, in so many ways that many Harlem residents find them distant, exclusive, competitive, even snobbish, just as other newcomers from the past have been.

White residents, new and old, are migrants from downtown or rich immigrants from Europe, and then there are the suburban pioneers who see Harlem as a bargain and recognize it not so much as uptown but as "midtown," because it is so accessible. The challenge for White newcomers is not simply overcoming an inability to understand that "it's a Black thing" but rather sorting through the mythology to reach more genuine layers of experience. This new Harlem—a strategic village undergoing a barrage of transmutations—is not easy to understand. Yet, after conducting research there for many years, I attempt to convey an understanding to readers of this complexity by incorporating as many voices as possible in the telling. The voices here are young and old, White and Black, Latino and African others who speak about what Harlem is today and what it was "back in the day."

The "new Harlem" still has some treasured brownstones and a few mom-and-pop retail shops, though they are quickly disappearing and certainly fewer will

be seen by the time this book is published. The irony is that this "new Harlem" is the work of the "new" vanguard of entrepreneurship (including many African Americans with MBAs and corporate experience). This new professional elite has conspired with the traditional elite from places like Morgan Stanley, Lehman Brothers, and other Wall Street firms and hooked up with political leaders such as C. Virginia Fields, Inez Dickens, and others who represent Harlem's Districts 9, 10, and 11.

On my way to Sing's Lounge near the 125th Street subway stop, I see three boys with a radio blasting a hip-hop tune, and they each start to break dance on a piece of cardboard. Tourists gather and throw dollars bill into a cloth container as other people rush on by. I have always felt squeamish about this type of street performance, because it reminds me of the old bootblack days when Black boys would scrounge around begging for money by tap dancing for whites. This is reminiscent of the days of stereotypes and myths about African Americans, and as soon as I take out my notebook, a woman next to me says, "The tourists are out today to see the niggers dance for them. I hate that shit, but I know the boys need the money, because it's better than selling them damn drugs."

Harlem is not nowhere, as Ellison once said; it is somewhere, everywhere, always present in our collective mind. When all is said and done, one thing is clear: Harlem may be shrinking because there are fewer pieces of old Harlem left, but the renaissance of Harlem could be in the night life umbilically connected to the city itself. While jazz clubs are few and the cuisine is not what it used to be, and Harlem is only expanding in the collective imagination—because the real, hard-edged, brutally honest, hauntingly beautiful Harlem may simply be lost—another, newer variety of Harlem may be emerging. And supers, like the canary in the coal mine, may think they have only a little time left, and perhaps they are right. When I asked Athena, the super whose wisdom I respect above all, about the future of the superintendent profession, she said,

> I believe the super of the future will not be a live-in super. Unfortunately, I fear they will do away with that live-in super, and you're going to have more and more of these live-out facility managers who just roam up and down the block and don't actually stay in the building, which is a sad situation. As it is, they are relaxing the rules to accommodate this very thing. It used to be the super had to live within 200 feet of the building; now they live a block away, two blocks, you see where I'm going with this. I think there's something irreplaceable about having a super living in the building. I think in the next 25 years, we are going to start seeing the tradition of the live-in super, that kind of community-minded super, slowly but surely going the way of the dodo bird.

Methodological Notes

This is a community study, more impressionistic than formal, and it may even be argued that I'm more interested in the anecdotal than the theoretical, but overall I'm keen to view contemporary life as a sociologist as opposed to a historian. In many ways, this book is written from the point of view of a participant observer recognizing that the voice one hears in these pages is in fact that of the superintendents of the city. The neighborhood is a constantly evolving universe where the supers and their role in that world play an intimate part. Because the super comes into contact with other human beings in the neighborhood, through various associations, as protector of tenants, attending church services, buying food in bodegas, playing numbers, gambling in clubs, eating in restaurants, or negotiating with homeless garbage pickers, the super is part of the community in a significant way. This study as a microethnography is rich with insights useful to any person interested in understanding how the social world of the superintendent functions. I describe the routes and rationales that bring people to careers in the occupation of superintendent and show the interaction between the super, the tenants in the building, and those outside the building who are tangential to the super in one way or another, as well as the kinds of encounters the super has, how the super deals with stresses of the job, and how the changing face of the neighborhood adds to that stress. The individuals and institutions involved are essentially the makeup of the neighborhood. For example, one key question is, why are some superintendents losing status as communities transition because of gentrification? I argue some supers are now porters, a lower rank in the trade, perhaps because of gentrification of the neighborhood where buildings are converted to cooperatives or condominiums and supers become superfluous.

I accompanied my initial informant to learn how he does the job of super/handyman as he interacted with friends, street people, tenants, and others. I then moved on to full-time supers. Athena and super/owner Kelly in South Harlem, as the only two women in the study, are given ample space to tell their stories. The material drawn from Kelly's interview combined with field work in her neighborhood made it possible to give an in-depth account of her life as a full-time super. In the same neighborhood, at the border of South Harlem at 96th Street, a Middle Eastern super, Sharif, is portrayed who is one of four white males. Uptown, Tolton, Larry, and Allan are featured, and across town in East Harlem, Frank is sketched. By spending time with each super, from as little as a short interview to as much as several months, and "shadowing" the super to see what being a super means and reveal the physical and emotional side of the super's life, an experiential dimension is illuminated.

In one section of the narrative, I talk with one of the oldest residents in the West Harlem community, Mr. David House, and he is an example of a link to larger structural and societal issues and another interesting example of the ethnographic overlap technique as I conceptualize it: the ability to sustain ongoing relationships with informants over time to gain their perspectives on issues related to the community.

Additionally, I gathered information in order to connect these stories with the happenings of the neighborhood: official spatial boundaries, neighborhood statistics, real estate numbers, and data from a close examination of the urban fabric (such as a survey of businesses, churches, public spaces, and administrative buildings). I interviewed a select number of tenants and landlords, business owners, street-corner men, women, girls and boys, police, lawyers, community organizers, house wives, barbershop patrons, bar customers, drug dealers, con men, nightclub owners, politicians, as well as doormen and security guards in order to provide some comparison with my extensive fieldwork with supers.

Fieldwork began in 2006 in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods of Lower South Harlem, West and Central Harlem, and Spanish or East Harlem. Ethnographic fieldwork, including observation, life stories, extensive nondirected interviews, and video graphic images and photographs, was the most adequate methodology to hear what supers, their families, and community residents all had to say, to penetrate the supers' professional lives, and to understand their experiences in these neighborhoods.

I also drew on scholarly sources related to race, poverty, segregation, and housing issues. In *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (2004), sociologist Arlene Davila asks the key question, will El Barrio disappear? She says succinctly how one of the central contradictions of East Harlem is the treatment of culture, as Adorno puts it, "as industry," "on the one hand creating jobs, businesses and profits and on the other dismissing or discounting race and ethnicity as ground for equity and representation."[2]

Another key source is anthropologist Philippe Bourgois's *In Search of Respect*, which concerns central-city social malaise and examines political economy and cultural nuances as they relate to present-day US apartheid. He sees drug dealing as a survival response to structural inequities. In *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), sociologist William Julius Wilson challenges "liberal orthodoxy in analyzing inner-city problems."[3] In *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (2010), sociologist Sharon Zukin argues that certain communities referred to as ghettos should not be so considered, since they exhibit heterogeneity, are not segregated, and are not racially stigmatized or dominated by economic disadvantage. In *American Apartheid* (1993), sociologist Douglas Massey and geographer Nancy Denton examine residential segregation as the key missing factor in explanations of the enduring poverty of the African American

community in the United States. Sociologist Loïc Wacquant has written previously about how differences must be minimized and the ghetto must not be "exoticized," because those residing in the ghetto should be seen as ordinary people trying to make a life as best they can under the "unusually oppressive and depressed circumstances thrust upon them."[4] Sociologist Eli Anderson argues in *Code of the Street* (1999) that "poor African-Americans make distinctions among themselves as 'decent' or 'street.'"[5] In *The Cosmopolitan Canopy* (2011), he continues a trend toward understanding race but in a slightly broader context.

I first interviewed people who were either supers or porters after locating buildings within the research areas, and to meet the requirements of the institutional review board, I had to give people an explanation of the study and a consent form to complete. I told people of the strict confidentially held to assure them that no harm would come to them or their families. For the supers, I emphasized that I would not reveal what they said to anyone, especially management.

I agreed to change their names (if they wished) and the building numbers, though I had to keep the location of the area because of the importance of the neighborhood context. The early questions were designed basically to set the person at ease; I asked questions about childhood, country of origin, sports, hobbies, and their families, and this made people comfortable and more willing to talk about themselves. Still, some were skeptical and did not want to reveal much, and some did not want family members interviewed. I felt this was related to events or situations they wanted to keep private, and I respected this. I tried to gather information from all the supers I interviewed and to use my own experience as a way to understand the super's world.

Finding not only one super but several in order to tell the story of a community, and doing it for a multiyear study, was a daunting task. However, I already had three supers on board, not including my own former building's as a possibility, and I had a host of prospects, some from friends who had moved to new buildings within the study area and some from the supers themselves. I utilized a form of snowball sampling and sought to capture as much diversity as possible; I found an African American, Macedonian, Latino, Romanian, Jew, and Italian, and I especially wanted to include a woman super of any ethnicity if I could find one who fit into my demographic considerations.

I had visited the East Harlem community where the new Costco was about to be built and met a Dominican super who might work out, and in addition, I liked the neighborhood because his building sat across from the Washington housing projects, a complex I was familiar with from previous work. In fact, it was the same block that Philippe Bourgois described in his study of crack users.

I recall some notes taken at the time of my first venturing into the area with an anthropologist colleague. It was a rather odd encounter. If it had been me

the cops stopped instead of him, Eli Anderson would refer to this as a "nigger moment."

One night, I went to visit my new neighbor in East Harlem, a friend and fellow ethnographer, Philippe Bourgois, who had just moved to East 115th Street with his new wife. This was in the 1990s, and he wanted to show me the neighborhood and the environs that he was now researching for his new book on the political economy of the area. He chose to live on 115th Street between First and Second Avenue, and he and I went on a stroll through the area that was to become his strategic research site. He was already getting flak from his new wife, who didn't particularly like the neighborhood of Spanglish-speaking Puerto Ricans and its crude street life and culture, but Philippe, who was often the brunt of lighthearted humor by the locals because of his Castilian Spanish (which the locals considered too "proper"), was sure she would adjust. Because he was such a genuine being, he felt in his heart that his wife would come to appreciate both the neighbors and the neighborhood and that the local yokels would come to appreciate him, which they did.

On this particular night, Philippe and I were only a few blocks away from his place on 115th and he was showing me around, giving me a lay of the land, and as we strolled up the street, a police car was visible in our peripheral vision. As we walked, the car slowed and appeared to be following us. As soon as I sensed that, a voice from the car's loudspeaker blurted out, "Hey, you. Come over here." Well, I thought he was talking to me, of course, being the Black guy in the duo and keenly aware of the prejudice and racism so endemic in the community, and I braced myself for the worst kind of interrogation. "Just another example of walking while Black," I thought. But to my surprise, as we both pointed fingers at ourselves indicating "Who, me?" they said, "No. You, white boy!" Well, you could have knocked me over with a feather. Philippe walked over to the car, and I stood there waiting, but he turned to me and said, "Walk on, I'll catch up with you." I did and glanced back, and I noticed him taking out his wallet to show the cops ID, who didn't get out of their patrol car but continued to question him. A few minutes later, I saw the car move past me. Philippe related what happened: "You won't believe this, but those cops were both drunk. I could smell the liquor on them, and the one on the passenger side told me I should go to my own neighborhood to buy drugs. I told him this was my neighborhood and that you and I were researchers and that I lived only a few blocks from here. They were surprised at all of this and looked a bit chagrined and said something about how dangerous this neighborhood was and sped off." I thought this encounter interesting because the cops at least knew the neighborhood was not the only place to buy drugs and that, in fact, drugs could be found just as easily (if they really looked or wanted to find them) in the white communities (suburbs) as well.

While I wanted a female (Latina) super, I had to have someone who spoke at least a modicum of English to match my lack of "Spanglish." I was conscious of the need to have at least one rookie super (one with fresh eyes to both the job and the neighborhood) as well as, of course, an older super who has "seen it all." I could not be overly choosy about the personality of the person; I just needed someone who was willing to allow me to "shadow" them for a time in their daily routine and be willing to talk to me on an ongoing basis and not "flake out" on me in the middle of my effort. Since all the candidates had to fall within the geographic area in which I planned to conduct the study, I spent many days scoping out the various areas to find the buildings that I felt were best suited for the study.

For example, the buildings had to be at least ten stories, and I chose buildings that where both new and "gentrified looking," as well as buildings in areas on the verge of being gentrified. In other words, I looked at communities in transition and areas where rumors abounded about changes in the neighborhood. In my preliminary search for a super, I worked originally with a colleague, and she and I went to a building in the same neighborhood in East Harlem where Philippe had done the research for his book *In Search of Respect*. After knocking on random doors to speak to the super of one of the buildings, I found a super willing to be interviewed and who gradually became the first super of my study. I had found a super willing to work with me.

I do feel that all the supers are representative of the gentrified neighborhoods I was trying to study. I became the "lone ranger" researcher riding again, and I approached each super pretty much the same way; I would tell them about the study and my goals and seek their help. I told them that I would "shadow" them for about two years, a day or so at a time, and that I needed to conduct interviews with their spouses and their kids, if they had any, but only if they lived with them in the same apartment. I did say I would like very much (though this was not mandatory for the study) to accompany them to a non-super-related affair, which could be anything from a baseball game to a poker party. I wanted to talk to everybody. My interest in supers started with my own neighborhood, and one of the kids from a previous book Bill Kornblum and I did called *Growing up Poor* became a super in one of the buildings before it became a gentrified co-op. It was the building my sister lived in for many years. Now Craig (the kid, now the man) was not a super anymore but a porter.

While there are many issues to be concerned about in doing a study like this, one positive aspect is the ability to take notes as you move through the process. I could not take notes all the time and in every situation, but since it was known to all that I was doing a study of the super, I could take notes and/or ask to take notes openly. This is very different than doing a study of illegal activity in sex houses and the like; this felt right and it was right, because people

in the settings agreed to the practice. There were instances when the use of a tape recorder was also needed, which was more cumbersome, but again, this too was acceptable. Another technical component was the use of video and photographs, all of which required some prep time and permissions. Though I have used many different types of data-gathering techniques including the use of video, film, and photographic elements, I think this might be the most challenging in many ways.

One interesting data set used by many social scientists is the New York City housing and vacancy survey, which is conducted every three years in order to implement the city's rent-regulation statutes. How do you measure how transitioning communities affect low-income folk? How do you estimate the scope and scale of displacement? How do you find people who have been displaced? These questions brought into play issues related to the study itself, and people wanted an explanation of what I was doing, so I provided them the rationale for the study. I did this to meet requirements of the institutional review board and get consent forms signed. I explained the strict confidentiality agreement and how real names would not be used and no harm would come to subjects, as I would not reveal what was said in confidence and off the record and building numbers would not be placed in the text, though I had to keep the location of the buildings in the account, since it linked up the importance of the neighborhood.

By early 2014, the study was winding down, and I needed to get the manuscript into shape by first completing the interviews with supers. I knew I didn't have enough data on the lives of supers and wanted a second woman super to round out the work. I asked my friend Hakim Hasan to read over what I had so far, and he pointed out some extremely important flaws, weaknesses, and other very poignant elements that really made a difference in the overall perspective. After that, I sought other help in finding supers to interview. And by chance, a leaky bathroom toilet set the ball rolling again to recruit supers.

I met Angel, a worker at the local plumbing supply business who did odd jobs. He asked if I knew about the new plumbing regimen, which involved a 1.6 liter water gadget that did not require the old-fashioned ball. I said I knew nothing about it, and he said he would come to my apartment and install it for me. I asked how much it would cost and he just shrugged it off and said, "Let's see how much work is involved." He came the next evening and I asked if he knew any supers, and that led to several new potential superintendents to interview.

Meeting Supers

Meanwhile, I had three students working with me: Alice Obar, a photographer who wanted to get involved in the project; Jessica Auger; and Jacqueline (Aailiyah) West. The photographer and I went out to do a quick photo shoot of doors and entranceways of the old and new buildings and had a brief brunch, and I expected to see her on Saturday for a few more shots. After two weeks had passed, and I called Rafael to tell him I was ready to interview him and his fellow super. He said he would call me the next day at ten o'clock in the morning to set something up. The next day, I had a dental appointment at ten, but I waited for his call, which never came. I called Angel to tell him his friend was shaky and went about finding other supers. I interviewed three supers in a row on September 11, 13, and 14. I had another scheduled for Tuesday, September 16, but he cancelled, saying he was very busy that day. Unfortunately, I was leaving town at three that day and could not meet him later in the week. I decided to ask the photographer working with me to do an interview with the lady super Harry Rivers said he knew about who worked for the Abyssinian Baptist Church and worked on several buildings in the same block as Harry's buildings on 122nd Street. I figured the photographer could kill two birds with one stone by photographing her and interviewing her at the same time. I sent the same list of questions I asked of all the other supers, and she tape recorded the responses and sent them to me. It was no question the most difficult of all the interviews, which included those with Alex (East Harlem), Flynn (Upper Manhattan), Robert (Central Harlem), Harry (Central Harlem), Felicia (West Harlem), Tolton (West Harlem), Mrs. Doe (West Harlem), and Mrs. Horsford (West Harlem).

Tolton gave perhaps one of the most enlightening and candid interviews, but he was very difficult to understand because of his thick Trinidadian accent, especially when he became passionate about a subject and he would revert to an indigenous syncopation that had a syntactic melody not easily grasped by those not from his region of the world. I also talked to a man in the park and two students who offered some account of life in the neighborhood. I also expected to get the opinion of the photographer and her husband, who both live in Harlem. In all, I interviewed four supers from the strategic research site and one from outside the target area, as well as one landlord and three women—two street people and one from the building I live in.

In the summer of 2014, I had the chance to visit France, and I spoke to a woman there who said the concierge (their version of the super) is under fire in Paris, since they are being replaced in buildings that become condos and co-ops. I told her that is exactly what I was researching in New York, and she said, "You

should come here and do the same work on our concierge, because they are both loved and hated here, but the same thing is happening to them."

Following is a vignette from the first day of my search for supers, back in 2006.

It was a rainy and windy day; the wind blew so hard that my colleague Sarah's umbrella nearly flew from her hand. To locate our first "super," we decided to inquire at a newer-looking building across the street from a public housing project local residents refer to simply as "Jefferson." The Jefferson projects house mostly African Americans in a traditionally Black and Puerto Rican neighborhood, but this area was quickly becoming part of what was being described as "Little Mexico" as a rash of new arrivals, the majority from Mexico, came to join the city's workforce.

There were now 300,000 Mexicans in the city, and many had settled in the neighborhood that begins as low as 100th Street and runs as high as 117th (mostly along First, Second, and Third Avenue) and the East Side. This 17-block area was home to many other Latino groups as well. Puerto Ricans, about 720,000 at last count, were still the largest of the Latino populations in the city. Dominicans, about 570,000, were the second-largest Latino group, and there were a host of smaller Latino/Hispanic groups, including Ecuadorians, Hondurans, and Cubans, to name only a few. There was also a very recent influx of Chinese coming from Chinatown.

At the new building's door, we were met by a woman on guard who was taking a smoke break. When we approached, asking for the super of the building, she immediately pointed to another woman standing inside the lobby near a window-framed office where you have to slide the window back to greet people.

It was an odd arrangement similar to an office building or a doctor's office instead of an apartment building. It turned out this was a special building where ex-drug users are given shelter once they complete a program of rehabilitation. All the tenants were ex-drug addicts. After introducing ourselves and explaining our purpose for being there, she explained that she was the building manager and that the super was in the building somewhere and would be around during the day.

He soon arrived, a short man with a ruggedly handsome face, rough hands, and a quick smile. He had the tools of the trade wrapped around his waist: a tool belt holding a set of pliers, a screwdriver, a hammer, and a tester for light switches. He was not disheveled, as supers are wont to be, nor was he particularly muscular in build either, but he was sharp witted, good humored, and intense in demeanor.

He said he was busy, but we told him we could follow him on his rounds that day, and he just laughed and said, "Oh yeah." He walked us to a small workroom near the back of the lobby. It was his tool room, with an electric

saw, a pipe cutter, dangling wires, plumbing equipment, mops and brooms, a six-tiered ladder, shelves holding screws and drills, buckets of plaster and paint resting along the edge of the floor near the back corner, a few boxes, a shovel, ice breakers, and several tall, oddly shaped cans standing in another corner. Despite the busyness of the room, it was unusually well organized for a super's space, though as cluttered as my sentences suggest.

"I started here four years ago, but my story started a long time before that." He said this without us prompting or seeking his story. "You see, I'm in recovery because I was an abuser. I was a user, but I been sober now for ten years." His confession came out of nowhere; he just spat these words out, I guess wanting us to know he had traveled a rather tortuous road to get where he is now, and there was a certain comfort in his telling. After he took us around the floor, he stopped at his apartment to show us his family photos. This was my first day out. I went back several times but never saw him again.

A Final Field Note

I will never fully feel detached from either this community or the city. I live in Harlem today.

I never left. I would leave only to attend school downtown or perhaps to shop at a large department store. I've lived there since I was teenager—I first learned about urban life there, learned about people, learned about love and togetherness, and of course, learned about pain and poverty, sacrifice and bravery. In a word, I learned what it meant to be human. I was an involved observer. I became a man in the ghetto—in my ghetto. So from the beginning, I lived life in this Harlem ghetto. I raised my kids there. I began my first sociological work there. I never left. Somewhere along the way, I was told Harlem was the ghetto and I was living in an internal colony—that I was living in prison, trapped in world I could not escape. But I didn't feel like a prisoner. I didn't feel trapped. Maybe that's what was supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to believe this reality was in any way unusual . . . It was supposed to feel normal in this enclosed world. Maybe I was supposed to accept it. Maybe I was supposed to like it and not to challenge it. Maybe I was supposed to not feel the need to break out.

Well, I never felt like a prisoner, but as my consciousness began to be raised, I was beginning to see that the police in my ghetto were only interested in protecting the property, not the propertyless. I learned the police did not see me as a citizen/person but as a criminal. But even when the schools I took my son to put up bars on the windows, I told him not to feel like a prisoner. Even when the police came to patrol in the schools, I told him not to feel like a prisoner. When he would come home from school and was stopped, frisked, and

questioned by the police, I told him not to feel like a prisoner. But one day as he grew up, he came to me and said he did feel like a prisoner, and he wanted to know if I would help him do something about it. I didn't feel like a prisoner because I had no political awareness. I didn't see the need to feel that way. I didn't understand that in order to feel like a prisoner, you have to be open to the possibilities of political awareness. You have to believe that there is something better than the treatment you are receiving. You have to think beyond yourself. You have to think about the community as a whole.

I think there is a bit of illusionary agency being played out here in this community, as many people see the changes taking place and all the new restaurants and nice things, and they somehow believe that they will be enjoying those amenities, but in fact they will not, or at least not for long. What is happening in these and other poor communities—the changes, the nice streets, the nice boutiques and bistros—is not for you and me. No, it's for them, the rich elites—Whites, Black, Latino, Gay—because they will be here long after you are gone. This illusionary agency is basically the belief that you are part of something, but in reality you are not—the idea that you have power, but you do not.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. John. L. Jackson, *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
2. *New York Times* (December 4, 1986).
3. Mitch Duneier, *Sidewalk* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).
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