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THE
TENANTS
OF
EAST
HARLEM

RUSSELL LEIGH SHARMAN

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ONE East Harlem

East Harlem sustains two ongoing and often competing narratives of urbanism: one inscribed in concrete and the other in flesh. People conform to the built environment just as the built environment conforms to people over the course of generations and centuries. The story of East Harlem is written in the sidewalks and storefronts, the abandoned buildings and corner bodegas, the public school yards and project courtyards as much as it is written in the lives of Puerto Ricans and African Americans, Italians and Mexicans, new immigrants and old. To understand East Harlem, one must understand how these two narratives fit together, how people transform the streets and how the streets transform the people.

Between 96th and 125th Streets, Fifth Avenue and the East River, East Harlem lies just beyond the printed boundaries of most tourist maps and the imaginations of most Manhattan residents. There, in little more than

two hundred city blocks, live more than one hundred thousand people. Italian, Puerto Rican, African American, Mexican, West African, Chinese, and more than two dozen other national and ethnic groups constitute one of the most diverse communities in New York City.

What follows is a biography of the neighborhood, a dual narrative of place and people that extends through time but is limited to a very specific space. The people introduced in each chapter model the ethnic distinctions that divide the neighborhood. There is the old guard: Pete,¹ one of the last Italian holdouts on the same block as Rao's famous Italian restaurant; José, a second-generation Puerto Rican resident who fled the crime of the 1980s, only to return more committed than ever to El Barrio; and Lucille,² an African American living in the shadow of the *other* Harlem and standing up to the daily demoralizations of public housing. There are more recent immigrants who seem likely to change the face of the community as drastically as earlier arrivals: Maria,³ an undocumented Mexican who has run the gauntlet of La Frontera, twice, to be a hairstylist in East Harlem; Mohamed, who came to New York from Guinea to open his own store just down the avenue from the mosque on 96th Street; and Si Zhi, a civil engineer from China whose night-shift job in the lobby of a Times Square hotel paid for his own building in the neighborhood. Finally, there are the newest immigrants to East Harlem, upwardly mobile whites fleeing downtown rent increases and settling in the newly renovated buildings that anticipated an expanding market. The new migration is most visible in the refurbished buildings, new commercial franchises, and new upscale restaurants featuring live jazz. But urban renewal comes at a price as Pete, José, Lucille, Maria, Mohamed, and Si Zhi face the looming uncertainty of market fluctuations and their ability to hang on in a moment of cataclysmic change.

East Harlem is a community defined by the attachments of its inhabitants. The life stories that I present explore how roots sink so deep so quickly in a community that has always hosted the city's most recent arrivals, how new immigrants challenge the claims of the old, and how that cycle is now threatened as never before by the specter of gentrification. But first, let us take a tour of the neighborhood.

BLOCK BY BLOCK . . .

An oversized concrete mosque dominates the corner of 96th Street and Third Avenue. Still unfinished but obviously thriving, the mosque is one of several institutions that mark the physical boundaries of the neighborhood. A few blocks away, between Second and First Avenues, stands Metropolitan Hospital, a large public institution that serves the majority of residents who have little or no health care coverage. On the opposite border, nestled in the most affluent corner of East Harlem on Fifth Avenue, lies Mt. Sinai Hospital. Mt. Sinai is an even larger voluntary hospital, serving the well-to-do of the Upper East Side and the few well insured of East Harlem. These buildings at the southern border of East Harlem mark off the barrio and stand out from the largely undifferentiated low-slung buildings of the neighborhood.

Standing next to the mosque, at the top of the hill on 96th Street that descends down into East Harlem, you can tell it's Friday by the black Lincoln Town Cars triple-parked along Third Avenue. The cars, lined up like a UN motorcade or a dignitary's funeral procession, wait for their owners to finish their afternoon prayers. They are the "gypsy cabs" that serve East Harlem and neighborhoods like it. The ubiquitous yellow taxis of Manhattan rarely cross the border at 96th Street without a paying customer already inside, usually headed for La Guardia Airport via the Triboro Bridge at 125th Street and First Avenue. Instead, the streets of East Harlem teem with the dark sedans of gypsy cab drivers, tapping their horns at each intersection to interest potential customers. The gypsy cabs are driven mostly by entrepreneurial West Africans who have managed to save enough cash to buy a car and work as illicit "wholesale" vendors on the streets. They offer reliable car service to local residents based on negotiated rates. With no meters and little regulation, the gypsy cabs are as illegal as street vendors, but the city has long abdicated control over this niche of the informal economy.

North along Third Avenue, past the mosque and Metropolitan Hospital, the street level is dominated by the thriving commerce of 99-cent stores, corner bodegas, discount clothing stores, and fast-food restaura-

rants. Sidewalks, split by weather and speckled with spit and chewing gum, are crowded with merchandise spilling from the open doors of discount stores and the folding tables of temporary merchants. Sweat suits and evening gowns, underwear and overcoats hang on racks and lie in bins, selling two for one and guarded by employees lounging in chairs held together with duct tape and speaker wire. Music tumbles from windows above and cars below—salsa, soul, rap, and reggae—blending with the Spanish, English, Mandarin, and Wolof spoken and catcalled from the vendors and customers. The smells of snow cones and *bacalaito*, uncollected garbage and fresh-cut flowers combine. Jewelry stores, pawn shops, hardware stores, dry cleaners, liquor stores, and pharmacies mark the distance from one block to the next. There is now a McDonald's every seven blocks from 96th to 125th Street.

And there, at almost every corner, often obscured by dumpsters and scaffolding, are the public galleries of urban art. Some bear the scars of turf wars, the "tagging" of graffiti writers, but most display a more discrete mural art aesthetic. Many mark buildings with the portraits of entertainers, an homage to the rap artist Biggie Smalls or the salsa king Tito Puente. Others carry explicitly political themes, declaring Puerto Rican independence or protesting the bombing of Vieques. One artist dominates this genre, a young Puerto Rican named James de la Vega who has left his mark in religious, pop cultural, and art historical iconography throughout the neighborhood. But the most common form of public mural art is often the most transient, the RIPs, or Rest in Peace murals, that mark the sites of violence. The colorful collages of the deceased's likeness along with the symbols of the person's passions or an ode composed by a loved one serve as semipermanent reminders of loss. Most of these are charred by the soot of temporary altars fashioned from cardboard boxes, votive candles, and liquor bottles.

Above, the skyline is a low-lying, seven-story maximum, occasionally disrupted by the towering public housing projects at 98th, 106th, 110th, 112th, and 125th Streets. The lower buildings display an arresting array of color above the bacchanal of commerce at street level. Old tenements of green, blue, red, and white form orderly canyons, guiding the streets and avenues as they neatly dissect the neighborhood. Rising high above

are the housing projects. The drab, muddy brick monoliths seem naked and unfinished, like foundation posts for some impossibly larger building. And the taller, more obtrusive buildings not only disrupt the riot of color; they also disrupt the orderly grid the older, smaller buildings work so hard to maintain. Organized around so-called superblocks, the housing projects razed micro-communities and closed off streets to create building complexes centered on green spaces. Heralded as a miracle of modern urban planning and a model for democratic housing, the projects were given names like Jefferson, Washington, and Johnson. But with no stores and no restaurants, the superblocks killed off the street life and quickly turned their green spaces into some of the most fearsome real estate in the city.⁴

The steady march north past short blocks and narrow streets is arrested at 106th Street, the first of two wide, two-way streets that intersect the neighborhood. On the corner of 106th Street and Third Avenue there are the telltale signs of relatively recent economic investment: KFC, Blockbuster, and a shiny new chain pharmacy. But there are also the indelible marks of the Puerto Rican community, the midcentury immigration trend that turned East Harlem into Spanish Harlem and El Barrio. La Fonda Boriqua sits just behind Blockbuster Video, serving up Puerto Rican comfort food to the local literati. And just down the street, at Lexington Avenue, is the heart of Puerto Rican East Harlem.

The 197-A Plan to revitalize East Harlem developed by the community board, calls the intersection of 106th Street and Lexington Avenue the "Cultural Crossroads." On one corner stands the Julia de Burgos Cultural Center, a somewhat controversial private enterprise that houses an upscale art gallery, music studio, and performance space. On Thursday nights the renovated public school building plays host to "Julia's Jam," an open mike event for Bomba y Plena music and Nuyorican poetry. Just next door is the spiritual anchor for the Latino Catholic community, St. Cecilia's Church. The large, ruddy red brick building dominates the block and still offers most of its services in Spanish. St. Cecilia's also houses Opus 118, the violin program made famous by Meryl Streep's film *Music of the Heart*. Across the street is Metropolitan Studios, new home to Black Entertainment Television. Facing St. Cecilia's Church and

the Julia de Burgos Cultural Center, Metropolitan Studios is a physical reminder of the African American presence in the community, most notably in its highly rated video music program, "106th and Park."

West of the Cultural Crossroads, at 106th Street and Park Avenue, a third of East Harlem is sliced off by the elevated Metro North railway. Bursting from underneath the streets of the Upper East Side at 98th Street, the chunky granite and steel viaduct carries office-weary workers north to Westchester and beyond. Gliding across the cityscape at the roofline, commuters are carried swiftly over and through the neighborhood that was founded in part to house the workers that built the tracks. Down below, the arches carved through stone at each intersection gape like forbidden caves, daring pedestrians to enter their unlit murky passageways. Stalactites of unidentifiable ooze hang overhead, and the stench of human waste hurries most against the light and into oncoming traffic.

Back into daylight and on toward the western border, the institutional buildings of public housing, public schools, and the hinterlands of Mt. Sinai Hospital mark the way toward the northern edge of Central Park and the famed Museum Mile. On the right, a public school yard is an assault of color. The graffiti "wall of fame" was designed to channel the creative energy of so-called urban vandals. A rotating mishmash of style and theme, the ball court-turned-outdoor gallery stands as an open-air, contested counterpoint to the institutionalization of art and "culture" awaiting at Fifth Avenue.

Fifth Avenue, known as Museum Mile because of its elite institutions, includes the Guggenheim and the Met. But two museums mark the western boundary of East Harlem at Fifth Avenue: the Museum of the City of New York at 104th Street and El Museo del Barrio at 105th Street. Like the mosque and the hospitals that guard the southern border, these two institutions of history and art face the western approach. Both occupy grand buildings on the avenue, and both face the Conservatory Garden, one of the most secluded and peaceful gated gardens of Central Park. But each has its own relationship to the neighborhood: one a museum of New York that blurs the line between city and community; the other a museum of the community that redraws the lines of division through art and performance.

A few blocks north of the two museums, a small brick plaza redirects traffic around the corner of Fifth Avenue and 110th Street. Lifted high above the street on a platform supported by figures of nude women, Duke Ellington stands regally next to a baby grand piano. The monument anchors the southwest corner of Central Harlem, the capital of Black America, where Duke Ellington reigned as most influential musician. But Duke does not face Harlem. He gazes across the other half of that traffic circle, which remains starkly empty of any similar memorial, into East Harlem. When Tito Puente died just three years after the installation of the Duke Ellington statue, Puerto Ricans were quick to rename 110th Street Tito Puente Way, and plans were set in motion to erect a statue, facing Duke, of Tito and his timbales.

A few blocks east, past the trestle of the Metro North railway at Park Avenue, is the intersection of 110th Street and Lexington Avenue, perhaps the most infamous corner in East Harlem. In the 1980s this was the epicenter of the crack cocaine catastrophe that rocked New York City. Made infamous by Philippe Bourgois's book *In Search of Respect*, the corner has long been known by locals as a haunt for drug dealers and violence. Even the post office located at the intersection seems to echo this mystique with the ominous "Hell Gate Station" emblazoned above its entrance.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the intersection of 110th and Lexington has made a slow climb out of disrepute. Thanks in part to an improved economy and more effective policing, the area has witnessed a few more of its abandoned buildings—cum—crack houses transformed into restaurants, grocery stores, and bodegas. Even the public library on 110th got a much-needed face-lift. Though drugs now change hands out of sight for the most part, the corner remains a constant reminder that East Harlem is a few subway stops and a world away from the rest of Manhattan.

Up the narrow canyon of Lexington Avenue, the thick odor of deep-fried food fills the air. Local *cuchifritos* entice pedestrians with greasy clear plastic facades filled with stacks of deep-fried fare distinguished only by size and shape. Chinese restaurants, most no wider than the door itself, serve up lo mein, chicken wings, and fried plantains to go, trying to keep up with the tastes of the neighborhood. And there is the ever-

popular fast-food knockoff, like Kennedy Fried Chicken with its oddly familiar red-and-white logo, that offers the eponymous poultry along with pizza, burgers, and the occasional egg roll, all prepared behind the safety of Plexiglas. Plexiglas does a thriving business in East Harlem.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the liquor stores that are as common in the neighborhood as intersections. Open later than most businesses, liquor stores are easy to spot at night, casting their fluorescent glow onto the sidewalk and street, collecting three or four loiterers like moths to a flame. Inside, the retail stores have the feel of a wholesale distributor, their wares displayed in bulk behind a wall of Plexiglas. Customers mill about in one or two lines, waiting for their turns at the plastic lazy Susan that spins away their money and spins back a bottle of Hennessy, Pisco, or wine.

Farther up the street you will likely find another mainstay in the local small business economy, the botanica. One-stop shopping for syncretic Catholicism, botanicas cater to the Old Country beliefs of older Puerto Rican immigrants. Window displays are public folk art museums, with effigies, icons, amulets, and artifacts. Inside, a busy Caribbean market brought indoors, bins full of herbs, pots for potions, and all manner of incendiary magic crowd the narrow aisles. Votive candles, slender glass holders filled with colored wax and painted with images of worship, are on offer for every occasion—one for a prayer to the Virgin Mary, another for St. Jude, and even one with a space for filling in a lottery number with a magic marker.

But the true mainstay of the East Harlem economy, the *barrio* equivalent of the general store, is the corner bodega. Entry-level operations in the formal economy, bodegas in East Harlem, as elsewhere in New York, are the last vestige of the mom-and-pop store in the homogenized city. They are the touchstones of micro-neighborhood identification. There is hardly a block without at least one bodega, hardly a bodega that doesn't serve one discrete, circumscribed urban space. They are the proscenium of storefront socialization. But for all their support of the individualized entrepreneurial spirit, bodegas thrive on their uniformity as much as Starbucks, Blockbuster, or KFC. They have the same colorful facades, announcing the same assortment of wares under the same emblem, the

“Deli Grocery” (don’t look for the word *bodega* on the signage), the same racks of 50-cent snack food, the same cases of soda, the same deli counters, the same aisles of cleansers and toilet paper. And the same rules of exchange apply at each Plexiglas cashier’s window: the wordless pantomime between customer and owner; prices dictated by the whim of the teller; and no need to form a line; if you know the price, just make sure the cashier can see your money laid out on the counter.

As you move from 110th Street up Lexington Avenue, you pass through the three-block-wide swath of public housing that was carved out of East Harlem from First Avenue to Lenox Avenue in Central Harlem to 116th Street, which marks the second of the two main east-west thoroughfares in the neighborhood. To the west, the elevated Metro North continues its trek along Park Avenue sheltering the defunct La Marqueta, a once-thriving Puerto Rican produce market. To the east, a noticeable shift in the street aesthetic begins to take hold. The red, white, and blue flags of Puerto Rican stalwarts give way to the green and red banners of Mexican newcomers.

If 106th Street marks the cultural crossroads of Puerto Rican East Harlem, 116th Street is the new nexus of Mexican East Harlem. Specialty groceries bathed in green and red offer imports from provincial outposts in the home country. Restaurants like La Hacienda let the ballads of northern Mexico fill the street, drowning out the salsa music from apartments upstairs. Travel agencies advertise one-way rates to Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Guadalajara. And just one block north stands another mark of Mexican East Harlem, a massive mural in the great tradition of Mexican muralists dedicated to the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico.

Farther east, 116th Street is brought up short against the concrete retaining walls of the FDR Parkway and the East River beyond—but not before crossing Pleasant Avenue, the last truncated stretch of concrete before the eastern border. From Jefferson Park at 114th Street to the Wagner housing project on 120th, Pleasant Avenue is still considered the Italian section of East Harlem. Here, in the quietest corner of East Harlem, the numbered streets dead-end into the parkway or the ruins of the abandoned wire factory that spreads over several blocks awaiting a new Home Depot and Costco wholesale club.

The stores at this eastern edge of East Harlem are a mix of commerce, but many still bear the marks of Italian Harlem: Ray's Italian Ice, Morrone's Bakery, or the original Patsy's, which still lures downtown pizza fetishists to its brick oven. Rao's remains the most famous landmark of a fading glory. Its thick red facade welcomes many of New York's elite, their limousines waiting to whisk them back safely to civilization after the second seating. Legend surrounds the place, rumors of a six-month waiting list and connections to the Genovese crime family, but most locals have never seen the inside. The stories themselves are probably more satisfying.

Despite the lasting fame of its eateries, the most defining features of Pleasant Avenue and its paved tributaries are its churches. A few neo-Gothic temples of Catholicism that once served an overcrowded Italian enclave now minister to the new wave of Latino faithful. Our Lady of Mt. Carmel remains the patroness of Pleasant Avenue, drawing back thousands of Italian Harlem expatriates for her annual feast day in July. Next door to her shrine on 115th Street, the new red brick National Museum of Catholic Art and History is set to replace the storefront version in the near future. But even the enshrined Catholicism has had to give way to Pentecostalism springing up in the shadows. The tumult of tambourines, guitars, and glossalalia crowds the solemn soundscape on Sundays and dominates during irregular prayer meetings throughout the week.

At 120th Street, Pleasant Avenue runs into Wagner Houses, a public housing project nestled in the shadows of the Triboro Bridge. Just the other side of its abandoned green space and seldom-used common areas lies 125th Street, the northern border of East Harlem. This is the last of the busy thoroughfares that divide the community into ten-block increments, and like its counterpart at 96th Street, it marks a palpable boundary between one world and the next.

West of Fifth Avenue, 125th Street, also known as Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, is Central Harlem's economic artery and cultural center. It is also the center of Central Harlem's economic development and urban renewal. Magic Johnson's movie theater and the Starbucks coffee shop formed a bulwark for future investment, and soon chain stores anchored the intersections of Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, and

Frederick Douglass Avenues. It was and is a socioeconomic revolution that spread to Central Harlem's housing market and produced what some have called a second Harlem Renaissance. Unfortunately, for many, it has meant an erosion of African American influence over an eerily familiar frenzy of real estate speculation.

On the other side of Fifth Avenue, the East Harlem side of 125th Street, this trend is visible in the changing face of the built environment. The Metro North station at 125th Street, where the railway makes its last stop in Manhattan before heading out of the city, is a renovated art deco homage to the economic changes. One block east, a behemoth Pathmark supermarket caters to every need, leaving the bodegas and 99-cent stores to wither and fade, and a shiny new office complex waits in joyful hope that commuters will find the 125th Street station as convenient as Grand Central.

From 96th Street to 125th, Fifth Avenue to the East River, East Harlem block by block, bodega to liquor store, tenement to project. From the transformation at 96th to the transformation at 125th, the neighborhood is a study in contrasts, an assault on the senses that is unrelenting and always changing.

. . . AND PERSON BY PERSON

East Harlem cast in concrete is only half the story. Running alongside and often counter to it is the other half, the flesh and bone that has inhabited this rectangle of urban space day after day for the past few centuries. Inasmuch as this book is the story of those streets, it is also the story of these people. Moving in and out, over and under the sulking buildings and sagging sidewalks, the tenants of East Harlem have carved a life from this place, a life for themselves and for their neighbors.

Dividing up the streets into micro-communities, residents have long dug in and held fast to their corner of the neighborhood, filling each niche with the social clubs and restaurants, murals and flags that defend the claims of Italians against Puerto Ricans, of Puerto Ricans against Mexicans, of old-timers against newcomers. The streets, of course, know

the bitter irony. The turf so zealously guarded by some today will be just as important to others tomorrow. It's a running joke among the silent participants, the buildings themselves: the concrete endures, but the people rarely last.

In these pages you will meet Pete, José, Lucille, Maria, Mohamed, Si Zhi, and me. We are the players: one life story for each of the streets and avenues that play host to a self-selected collective; one life story for each of the self-defined ethnic and national groups that dominate East Harlem.

In "Pleasant Avenue: The Italians," you will meet Pete, a third-generation Italian who was born on 114th Street near Pleasant Avenue in the 1920s. He's a small man with a shock of silver hair and the toothless grin of unassuming wisdom. His memories tumble out in vignettes of his mother sewing leather gloves in the basement, of his gang, the Seahawks, and their social club, of his building razed to make way for public housing projects, of his neighborhood changing before his eyes. Now Pete presides over 114th Street, just a block from his long-forgotten tenement birthplace, in his plaid-striped, folding lawn chair. Balanced precariously over the broken sidewalk in front of his building, Pete reads his *Daily News* and regales the non-Italian youth with stories of his East Harlem, Italian Harlem. "This used to be all Italian, only Italian," he will say from his chair, watching the children play in Jefferson Park across the street, "not like today."

Italians were the first dominant ethnic group of the twentieth century in East Harlem. As Pete likes to brag, "There were more Italians on 112th Street between First and Third than anywhere else in the country." German and Irish Catholics, who had settled earlier, were ruthless in their discrimination against the southern Italian immigrants,⁵ but by the 1920s their numbers overwhelmed every other ethnic claim to the neighborhood. Many of the German and Irish Catholics, as well as European Jews, began to flee East Harlem.⁶ This Italian territorial victory would not last long, however, as African Americans moved into the vacancies left by Europeans fleeing the Italian "invasion," and, just a decade later, the unprecedented influx of Puerto Ricans overwhelmed even the Italian claim to the neighborhood.

Today most of Pete's Italian neighbors and all of his family have long since died or moved away. Indeed, Pete's story demonstrates, perhaps more clearly than elsewhere, the complete cycle of intracity migration, from early influx to permanent settlement to upward mobility and abandonment. Part of this story is the story of public housing in New York—how visionary urban planners turned a thriving community into a demographic dumping ground in less than a decade. Pete is a witness to that transformation, but he is also a witness to the early history of Italian settlement along this avenue and its tributary streets, from the youth gang rumbles to the aging social clubs, establishing the well-worn pattern of ethnic immigration that echoes in each of the stories that follow.

In "106th Street: The Puerto Ricans," you will meet José. A scrappy Puerto Rican kid, José grew up, dodged gangs, and met his wife on the streets of East Harlem. After a tour in the army as far away as Staten Island and a brief sojourn in Florida during the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s, José returned to the neighborhood with his wife, Cecilia, to raise their children. Wearing a Day-Glo Jets jacket and carrying a digital camera, he is a permanent fixture on the streets around 106th Street now. José maintains a website for the community, www.east-harlem.com, an evolving ode to a patch of New York real estate that, for all intents and purposes, was annexed by Puerto Rico after Puerto Rico was annexed by the United States.

José was born in the 1950s, the decade of legend in Puerto Rican East Harlem. In the era after World War II, hundred of thousands of Puerto Ricans were encouraged to leave the island for the United States, New York City in particular. In the first year after the war, 39,000 Puerto Ricans made the journey, with an annual average of 50,000 in the next decade. Another 586,000 Puerto Ricans would leave the island for New York City in the 1960s.⁷ It was a mass migration that rivaled that of the Italians before World War I, with two crucial differences. Since 1898 the United States has maintained an ambiguous claim on the island, and since 1952 Puerto Rico has remained in political limbo, neither wholly independent as a nation nor fully incorporated as a state.⁸ The Puerto Ricans arriving in New York in the twentieth century were not immigrants like the Italians; they were southern migrants, no different in legal terms from

African Americans moving north after the Civil War. In addition, unlike turn-of-the-century immigrants who took advantage of a booming industrial economy, Puerto Rican settlers entered the labor market at a time when North America, especially New York City, was shifting from an industrial to a service-based economy.⁹ This left many thousands of Puerto Rican newcomers at a distinct disadvantage.

José's story explores the institutionalization of Puerto Rican identity along the broad stretches of 106th Street, chronicling the transformation of East Harlem from an Italian to a Puerto Rican community and the way in which Puerto Rican newcomers managed to become the old guard in a few short decades. Unlike Italians, Puerto Ricans were citizen immigrants, a peculiar paradox that would haunt them into the twenty-first century. José's story focuses on the process of Puerto Rican entrenchment, playing on the ambiguous nationalism that stirs most of the local residents to shore up the boundaries of their community in the face of yet another wave of immigration. José is the face of these changes, born on the streets of East Harlem and fighting to hold on to El Barrio.

"125th Street: The African Americans" is Lucille's story. Sitting in the lobby of UPACA Gardens, Lucille presides with embittered optimism over the slow decline of public housing in the neighborhood. Born on 117th Street in East Harlem, she played double Dutch in the shadow of the elevated train, innocent of the struggle undertaken by her mother and grandparents in their move from the South. But when her mother died quietly in a Harlem social club, she was swept into a subsidized existence of welfare and public housing. A young woman with a daughter of her own and two brothers to care for, Lucille refused to take help for granted. She created a youth center in the basement of her building and more than thirty years later still sits tenant patrol in the evenings. The tenements of her childhood are all gone now, replaced with upscale townhouses and priced out of reach, but she can still see what once was—street life as community, the extended family of neighbors and friends.

African Americans settled east of Fifth Avenue long before the first housing projects were built in the 1940s and before Puerto Rican migration began in earnest. The post-Reconstruction mass migration of African Americans out of the southern United States and into the industrialized

North radically transformed the demographics of cities like New York, and upper Manhattan became an enclave community from the first years of the twentieth century. The reputation of Central Harlem as the capital of Black America is now well ensconced, and at the turn of the century Fifth Avenue was not the discrete boundary it is today. East Harlem, though at the time already considered a European ghetto with thousands of Irish, German, and Italian settlers, was close enough to the excitement of the Harlem Renaissance for thousands of African Americans to put down roots. Indeed, Central Harlem remained the center of African American attention, even as Italians and then Puerto Ricans established the Fifth Avenue boundary throughout the twentieth century.

Lucille represents the African Americans who have long debated the Puerto Ricans as to the ethnic character of East Harlem and its relationship to Central Harlem. Since 1990, with urban renewal driving more and more African Americans out of Central Harlem, non-Hispanic black residents have added more than six thousand newcomers, while Puerto Ricans have actually lost more than seven thousand.¹⁰ This leaves East Harlem Puerto Ricans at a numerical disadvantage compared to non-Hispanic black residents for the first time since the 1940s. Lucille's story examines this slow-burning rivalry between African Americans and Puerto Ricans, revealing the cultural abdication from East Harlem by many African Americans who still feel a stronger connection to Central Harlem and exposing the peculiar constructions of racial identity that blur the boundaries between two groups bent on division.

"116th Street: The Mexicans" introduces Maria. An eager young woman with an eye to the future, she scrambled across the Arizona desert in the mid-1990s to earn funds to build her mother a home in Mexico. After a brief stint as a housekeeper in New Jersey, Maria moved in with friends in East Harlem. She leased a chair in a neighborhood barber shop and began putting a decade of salon training to use. Now she shares a one-bedroom apartment off Second Avenue with two brothers, a cousin, and a husband she met in the neighborhood. The steady stream of relatives through their cramped apartment joins the larger flood of Mexican immigrants to East Harlem—a promising sign for Maria's business as non-Mexicans in the neighborhood often refuse to sit in her chair.

Since 1990 the Mexican population in East Harlem has increased by more than 350 percent, while the Puerto Rican population has decreased by 17 percent. Based on the latest census, there are now more than ten thousand Mexicans living in East Harlem, which does not include undocumented migrants who refused to participate in the count. This is only part of a citywide phenomenon of Mexican immigration in the past couple of decades. Between 1980 and 1990 Mexican immigration to New York more than doubled. Between 1990 and 2000 it more than tripled. Most of these new immigrants come from southern Mexico, a region known as Mixteca, but the newest trend in Mexican immigration is from an area near Mexico City called Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl, or "Neza." In 1992, 15 percent of Mexican migrants came from Neza; today the figure is closer to 25 to 30 percent.¹¹ In East Harlem undocumented migrants from Mixteca and Neza fill the remaining tenement buildings, and resourceful entrepreneurs have concentrated their Mexican groceries, restaurants, and record stores on 116th Street.

Maria's story examines the new and ongoing process of settlement for one of the neighborhood's newest immigrant groups, bringing a discrete Latino nationalism that competes directly with the Puerto Rican claim to the "Spanish" of Spanish Harlem. Her story allows for a thorough treatment of undocumented migration and the clash of inter-Latino identities that characterizes much of contemporary urban demographics in the United States.

In "Third Avenue: The West Africans," I introduce Mohamed, who arrived in New York from Guinea in 1991. He is a tall, mustachioed man who looks much younger than his forty years. Always ready with an easy smile, Mohamed's natural countenance is a studied seriousness that is always looking to the future. Like most men his age, he left West Africa to secure a place in the burgeoning traders' market of New York. Tribal tradition encouraged an educated profession, medicine or law, but Mohamed broke with his lineage and the past to enter business. Starting out as a messenger on the streets of lower Manhattan, Mohamed eventually opened his own 99-cent store on Third Avenue in East Harlem.

West African immigration is one of the most recent events in the demography of New York City. The devaluation of the West African franc

in 1994 reduced the standard of living in the Francophone nations by 50 percent almost overnight, forcing professional traders to liquidate inventory and set off for more lucrative markets. The West African population in New York doubled between 1990 and 1996, and though they are still far fewer in number than other immigrant groups, West Africans have become a visible presence as vendors on the streets of the city.¹² Like Italians at the turn of the twentieth century, many West Africans at the turn of this century are transient tradesmen, spending three to six months in the United States before returning for a similar period in Africa. Unlike the Italians and most other groups, West Africans have not established a concentrated urban settlement but rather follow a dispersed pattern of residence throughout the metropolitan area. This is a result in part of the diversity of West African points of origin. Most arrive from Ghana and Nigeria, but many more are arriving from the Francophone countries of Senegal, Guinea, Mali, and Niger. Though some West Africans have taken up residence in East Harlem, most commute to their businesses on Third Avenue from Central Harlem, Queens, or New Jersey.

Mohamed's story reflects the lives of West African commuters and settlers, probing their connections to the community and their hopes for the future. For many, Third Avenue is one great pedestrian mall, worth the commute after being pushed off 125th Street by the city and by African American store owners who resented the competition. For others, those who have moved from the folding table to the storefront, East Harlem is home, the crucible of the American Dream conceived years ago and thousands of miles away.

"Second Avenue: The Chinese" presents Si Zhi's story. Si Zhi is thin and wiry, with a generous smile. His thick Shanghai accent obscures his English only half as much as he thinks it does, but then he is a perfectionist. Si Zhi built ships as a civil engineer in Shanghai, and he brought his precision and attention to detail, along with his wife and daughter, with him when he arrived in New York a dozen years ago. But the language barrier precluded a career in engineering, or even unionized construction, and he found work cleaning out dirty ashtrays in the sleek lobby of a Times Square hotel. As with many of his compatriots, his first apartment was in an overcrowded tenement building near Chinatown.

After several years of hard work and sacrifice, he was able to buy a three-family townhouse in East Harlem, part of a real estate initiative to make home ownership easier for low-income families. He still works the night shift at the hotel, and during the few daylight hours he enjoys, he is still busy perfecting his new home.

Chinese settlement in the United States is older than that of most of the groups represented in these chapters. Thousands of ethnic Chinese migrated to the West Coast in the nineteenth century, mostly as manual labor for the growing industrial economy. New York did not see comparable numbers of Chinese settlers until well into the twentieth century. A change in immigration law in the 1960s removed quotas on specific sending regions, and this turned the tide of Chinese immigration to New York City. Documented immigration from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan jumped from 110,000 in the 1960s to 445,000 in the 1980s. In the 1980s and 1990s there were an average 12,000 new Chinese immigrants settling in New York City each year. Chinatown, on Manhattan's Lower East Side, once contained almost all ethnic Chinese New Yorkers in ten square blocks, but after the 1960s Chinese settlers spread beyond the boundaries of Chinatown and into all five city boroughs, especially Brooklyn and Queens. By the 1990s new immigrants were arriving from nontraditional areas in mainland China, including Beijing and Shanghai, which historically retained its residents.¹³ Global economic restructuring and changes in Chinese politics loosened the flow of migrants. Si Zhi left from Shanghai just after the Tiananmen Square standoff in 1989.

Si Zhi's story offers insight into the impact of these new trends in immigration from mainland China and the strategies for creating a sense of place in a nontraditional settlement area. East Harlem is not a Chinese enclave. In fact, their numbers compared to those of the other groups included in this book are quite small. But their presence is felt in both housing and small business ownership. In telling Si Zhi's story, I explore how he and others like him maintain a sense of community that reaffirms transnational ties without abdicating a connection to their host country. Si Zhi manages this paradox quite well: he recently purchased a condominium in a luxury high-rise in downtown Shanghai for his annual trips "home," and in 2002 his daughter enrolled at West Point Academy.

The last chapter, "Urban 'Renewal' and the Final Migration," is my story, for I am the face of what could be the final migration. I moved to East Harlem with my wife in 1999. Together we started a local nonprofit organization, and I taught part-time around the city. East Harlem was the ideal site for our vision of cooperative art education and, we hoped, the ideal site to put down roots in a city notorious for spitting out young idealists. But it was not intended as a research site.

Not long after settling into the neighborhood, I became involved with the local community board and began to establish a network of contacts for our nonprofit. We were committed to local leadership and put together a board of directors from local residents. Our insular focus proved, in the end, a fiscal disaster, but in terms of our own attachment to the community, it was an overwhelming success. Neighbors became friends, and friends became confidants as we all struggled to make a place for ourselves in the always-changing neighborhood. I began to see the contours of ethnic allegiance through the individuals I knew on the streets, in the stores, and on the community board. Their stories became more and more compelling, and eventually, writing them down was unavoidable.

Through it all, we were seldom made aware of our own ethnic difference. The occasional "Evening, officer!" called out by a group of teenagers hardly bothered me, and I could even ignore the more rarely mumbled "Fucking white people" as we walked past. But as the 1990s became the new millennium, it was harder to ignore the more frequent sightings of white folks moving into the neighborhood. East Harlem was still a gritty, urban space, but even that was changing as new restaurants and chain stores slowly began to appear.

East Harlem has changed significantly since the startling increase in crime reported by Bourgois in the 1980s.¹⁴ Indeed, crime has actually dropped by as much as 64 percent. With less open violence, reinvestment was inevitable as developers sought to "reclaim" a corner of Manhattan, arguably the most desirable real estate in the country. As one real estate agent recently explained, "It's the rock, the green rock!" Most streets still boast at least one derelict building, but these are being replaced by new businesses and upscale or mixed-income residences at a quickening

pace. One census tract in particular, consisting of four square blocks in the southwestern corner of the neighborhood, tells the story. With a per capita income of \$53,039, the residents of census tract 160.02 earn more than four times the East Harlem average, and its residents, 63 percent of whom are non-Hispanic whites, do not look like the rest of the community. While most East Harlem residents can still point out bullet holes in cracked facades and still speak of the previous decades in the weary tones of veterans, all agree the neighborhood is changing.

This chapter tells my story and that of others like me who are caught in a paradox of urban renewal that makes way for the upwardly mobile by displacing the recently settled. I met Maria at the barbershop on my street, Mohamed runs the 99-cent store on my corner, and Si Zhi is my landlord. These are my neighbors, and I represent an economic force that could change everything. My role in the drama completes the cycle of street-level contradictions in East Harlem, how roots sink deep without the strength to hold firm and locals form attachments in this always-changing community.

Our stories are as representative as any; that is to say, none speak for all, but all of us speak with authenticity, with the authority of experience. In each you will find the cords that tether our stories to the stories of those we represent, the history of our entrenchment and the hopes for our future. In each you will find the ties that bind us all to East Harlem, the story of one community in one city that is as unique as it is universal.