

## Buffalo's Lower West Side

From *Triptychs: Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited*, WW Norton, 1994.

by Joann Wypijewski

Buffalo's Lower West Side presents itself like a riddle. Its central corridor, Niagara Street, emerges from the geometric precision of the city's political hub and, with that, all certainties vanish. Churches rise up, but where are their congregations? Squat blocks of angular gray apartment projects secure a stretch of space, but where is their neighborhood? An arm of the New York State Thruway intrudes, elbowing out of sight the steely expanse of Lake Erie just to the west. Small proprietors, even successful ones, vie with the street's unnatural emptiness and with McDonald's, a kind of postindustrial village green. The visitor who approaches from the city center is thus seized with a loneliness, and with the fragmented legacy of urban renewal.

It is possible to live one's entire life in Buffalo and never know, never even see, the six square blocks or so that fan out on either side of Niagara in the shadow of City Hall. Broad avenues and highways carry travelers to the downtown area and the fashionable part of the West Side without need of detours. And what necessity does not dictate, the news discourages. For about twenty years, from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, newspaper dispatches on the area were suffused with the clichés of renewal: neglect, blight, change, and the surety that "you cannot build until you destroy." Most of the waterfront section of the Lower West Side—call it the left flank of Niagara Street—was destroyed in those years. The apartment complexes that rose up in place of the old neighborhood houses—most prominently the Shoreline Apartments, jagged clusters of low-rise buildings uniformed in precast concrete, illumined by globe poll lamps and defined in relation to one another by grass and asphalt parking circles—were imagined as an "in-town village" to challenge the suburbs. But for the Lower West Side twenty years on, a new set of clichés has replaced the old: neglect, drugs, gangs, AIDS, prostitution, and murder. The profile is true enough to make even the most unknowing confident in their appraisals, and to keep most outsiders away except for narcotics dealers and their customers, rival gangs, buyers of sex, and the indigent, some of whom walk for miles across town to eat in the soup kitchens or lay themselves down in the open fields.

Real life confounds so singular a profile—something that becomes clear as soon as one turns off the main thoroughfares and enters the streets of the Lower West Side. In sections that were spared the bulldozer's progress, houses built in the 1850s, in the 1880s, the 1920s, and beyond up to the present sit in amusing relation to one another: the peaked cottage with faux brick front extension, metal side awning, and curly wrought-iron effects stands beside a specimen of Victorian ideals—mansard roof, four-story octagon tower, elaborate crowning rail as on a widow's walk, coat of arms above the doorway. Block after block displays this cacophony of styles—Italianite and classical, Second Empire and Gothic Revival, nineteenth-century workman's cottage and Sears-era two-family.

Signs of history's arithmetic abound, the additions and subtractions, accumulations and abandonments, made by countless residents down the years. Only in a few areas, designated historic districts (an afterthought once the demolition crews had completed their work nearby), does time seem hobbled. There, with odd exceptions, one finds no ungainly porches, no exotic colors, no extensions faced with swirly shingling, no window grates or metal security doors to

betray the scars of more than a century of living. There no empty lots expose backyard vegetable rows or the rears of houses striped by wear or necessity: metal sheets conceding to shingles, conceding to tar paper, conceding to plain board. There one gets no abrupt surprises—no doors left open on a summer afternoon to disclose, behind a tumble-down façade, a beautiful floor, a curving white staircase in gleaming yellow rooms.

Yet even in these historic districts, even in the boutique and semi-bohemian Allentown section, there is no sense of the “restoration village” reducing history to marketable quaintness. Nor is there any uniformity of style or rigid separation of class to suggest a genteel outpost against the skewers of modern life (though what gentrification there is on the Lower West Side is largely confined to these areas). Still, distinctions are palpable if not always visible. People who live just outside preservation’s embrace—especially those who thirty years ago had to vacate their neighborhood streets for urban renewal—speak of historic designations with a curl of irony. The status of the officially preserved inevitably implies its opposite, casting everything that surrounds the hallowed ground as humdrum, unimportant, expendable. And never far away is the illusion of recapture, a wish against time and for a pure harmony that never existed. On a street adjacent to one of the preservation districts a developer advertises a stretch of new brick houses, stolid simulacrum of the old, under the slogan “We’re building history.”

Elsewhere, history is not so much built as continually adapted. On Virginia, the neighborhood’s defining cross street, Hispanos Unidos, a community service organization, occupies what was once (circa 1869) the Free Methodist Church. Across the way the Iglesia de Cristo Misionera M.I. has taken up a building whose façade of cinder blocks, exposed brick, and crumbling plaster seems to merge the silhouettes of an abandoned theater and the Alamo.

Almost 9,000 people live on the Lower West Side. Once called the Italian neighborhood—it is traditional to speak of Buffalo in terms of ethnic districts—the area now has a decidedly Latin cast. Yet one would not say the Lower West Side is “the Spanish neighborhood” and leave it at that. On street corners and project driveways, in the back and forth of social intercourse, the faces reflect layers of in-migration: Puerto Rican, Italian, black (from the South and the city’s East Side), American Indian, Arab, Vietnamese. More interracial exchange occurs here than in any other part of Buffalo. Pinwheels of children, of every color, whirl about the sidewalks. Among their elders one finds every shade of tolerance, every tint of good and bad, every addiction and process of reform.

People confess: “I was a thief, pimp, I did everything. I’m not proud of it, but it was survival. Only one thing I haven’t did in my life is rape a woman and rob a church. That was *out*. You have to stop somewhere.”\* They solicit: “Excuse me, miss. Do you smoke crack by any chance?” They complain: “All my troubles began when we moved into this house. My husband died, left me with two kids, ten and fourteen. I was thirty-six. Four months later my mother died. I went to work and then my daughter’s troubles began a few years after that. Spinal problems, heart problems—oh, didn’t she have it! Now she’s getting her degree but, poor thing, she has high cholesterol.”

Some work two jobs six days a week to put their children through school. Others lost the best job they ever had when the factories closed or accident or illness disabled them. Here too are

signs of history's arithmetic, as families grow, merge, split, extend by generation; as people fall in love across color lines; as men (and some women) change families every few years; as partners are torn from each other by death, jealousy, or jail. Time—not only their own but that of a whole community—receives its tribute in their stories.

**Sammie Lee (Pee Wee) West:** *Now, I came to the West Side in 1953—122 Seventh Street. Seventh Street and Georgia, right by City Hall. I was fourteen years old. And that's where I learned to become street-wise, street-smart, right there. At that time, on one side of Georgia it was all Puerto Rican. On the other side of Georgia it was Italian. And over in another part it was Greek. Okay, now I'm black; I'm in between three different categories. And there are only two black families on Seventh Street. Now, when I go to a Puerto Rican store, they speak to me in Spanish, so I had to learn Spanish to get what I want. I go over to the Italian store and I have to learn Italian to get what I want. I go over to the Greeks, I have to learn Greek to get what I want. And so on the West Side, if I go up to you, I know right where you're coming from. People say, "Oh, he speaks some of my language; I know him, that's Pee Wee—he's one of us." Honest to God, the Puerto Ricans, right today, they think I'm a black Puerto Rican. I'd be out there drinking, talking to the guy. "What's your name, man?" "Sammie Lee Martinez." I took a name—Sammie Lee Martinez. That's how I survived with the Puerto Ricans. I talk to the Italians, say I have a black-Italian godfather. I go to the Greeks, say I got a Greek cousin. So I'm safe. Now, the Italians don't hurt me, the Puerto Ricans don't hurt me, the Greeks don't hurt me. Only time I ever get hurt is when I go over to the East Side and my own black people hurt me. Why? Because I'm different from them. I'm from the West Side. If you're from the West Side, you're not too cool on the East Side.*

*But everybody I meet on the East Side, I met them before. Ask me where. In jail. Everyone I see: "Yo, my man, what's happening?" I'll be walking with my wife, with my son—"See that guy, I met him in jail." I don't say I met him at a church, I met him at a party; no, I met him in jail. I know about five, six hundred people. "Where'd you meet 'em at?" I met 'em all in jail.*

*The first time I was in jail was '72; last time I went to jail was '85. Always it was for drunk and disorderly conduct. See, now that's another thing: when I was coming up, I was mainly alcoholic; I just only loved alcohol, no drugs. I tried drugs, but it seemed like I was married to the alcohol; it was jealous, wouldn't let me mess with that drugs. If I might do drugs it might be about half a day, a few hours, and I can't take it no more. I'd leave it alone; my mind wouldn't go back to it. The alcohol, I can say, the alcohol kept me from becoming a junkie, honest to God.*

*Okay, so, now I go back there sometime, on Seventh Street—down by where the Shoreline projects are at—I took my grandson there recently and I say to him, "You see that spot right here; I used to live right here." I say, "You see these streets [little driveways within the complex]; they weren't here. None of this was here then. Everything's changed."*

*When they had started talking about demolishing the buildings, people were angry. You know, if you lived there you didn't consider that you just lived there; you were raised there. If I see you on the street, I know where you're going, I know where you're coming from. If you see*

*me on the street, you know where I'm going, where I'm coming from. You know where I live; I know where you live. If someone comes looking for you, I can tell 'em where you're going. You didn't have to lock your door like you do now. If I saw someone coming up to your house I could say, "Yo, she ain't home, she'll be back in thirty minutes"—something like that. Now I see people coming around I don't say nothing. Things changed—oh, a lot. Like all this murder going on—was no murder down there. Down on Seventh Street and, I forget the other street, there was a steam house down there. People take steam showers and baths. You could walk in there, people had their clothes hanging all along the side of the walls, money all in their wallets. Nobody never took nothing.*

There is a store, only slightly higher up on the West Side, named Horsefeathers, that specializes in urban architecture. What Walter Benjamin called “the most binding part of the communal rhythm” is here arrayed in bits and pieces: cornices, friezes, elaborate entryways, mantles, stained-glass panels, gold-leaf statues, porch railings, staircase spindles, pillars and pediments, beveled, etched, and frosted glass—some of it by the hundreds, by the roomful, much of it from the streets of Buffalo.

Leafing through the photographic files of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, one can fit the pieces back together again in the early views of the Lower West Side. The architecture in these pictures—as on the street today—suggests a time before class became the primary arbiter of residence, when the artisan and fancy man lived in democratic proximity. This is partly true, though it's easier to slip into sentimentality about such things now, looking at buildings that share the patina of long years of adjacence and forgetting that in the early days of the city, ten, twenty years could bring unfathomed changes.

What is now the Lower West Side did not start out as an “ethnic neighborhood.” It was Indian land, and most of it remained so—though by then within the constraints of a reservation—when Joseph Ellicott drew up the first plan for Buffalo in 1804. Inspired by the design for Washington, Ellicott laid out a public square with eight broad avenues radiating from it at equal angles. One of these was Niagara Street. After the War of 1812, in which the village was burned to the ground but never captured, the citizens of Buffalo followed Ellicott's original design in the rebuilding, and village life circulated between the vicinity of the public square and the area to the south, along the harbor on Lake Erie. The very tip of the Lower West Side, now the historic “West Village,” may have been moderately settled, but mostly the West Side was pastoral, thick with elm and horse chestnuts, and the orchards of gentlemen farmers like General Porter, hero of the war, friend to Lafayette, and later John Quincy Adams's secretary of war. The Seneca Indians had by this time been divided, swindled out of 4 million acres of land and confined to a reservation on the banks of the Buffalo Creed to the south. (By 1850 even that settlement would be forsaken.)

The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 transformed Buffalo into a commercial nexus between the cities of the East and the farmlands of the Midwest. From a population of 2,412 in 1825 it practically quadrupled, to 8,668, five years later. Particularly on the waterfront, where the canal met the lake, this easygoing village became a jangle of warehouses, trading offices, shops, inns, and houses. Immigrants, wanderers, and people in the bawdry trades began to take up

residence, drawn by work on the canal and related pursuits. As time passed, the kitchen gardens and lawns of aristocratic homes on an arc of property around the old village square became building sites. Where City Hall now stands and in a triangular section behind it going down to the water a patchwork of class emerged. Those larded with prosperity, or desirous of open space, or fearful of the laboring classes began to move “up” (following the general course of the Niagara River on the West Side), instigating a process that continues to this day.

Development, though, had its own dynamic. Some immigrants, mainly Irish and German, also moved up, settling on the waterfront of the Lower West Side; and commerce rippled along Niagara Street. Industry arrived in the form of iron furnaces and foundries. By 1850, Buffalo had a population exceeding 42,000. A steam railroad had begun running up Niagara Street to Niagara Falls. Later, the street would be a route for elegant horsecars drawn over cast-iron rails, and eventually for the city’s first electrified streetcars.

As the city intruded, the moneyed classes could still secure their versions of pastoral on the Lower West Side. Dr. Ebenezer Johnson, the city’s first mayor, had maintained a twenty-five-acre suburban estate not a half-mile from Buffalo’s central square; in the 1850s this was subdivided for smart in-town residences arranged around a mall, part of which remains today under the name Johnson Park. Nearby, extending in 1865 from Delaware Avenue to what is now Whitney Place, was the estate of the tannery tycoon Bronson Rumsey, who from his Second Empire-style mansion oversaw a personal Shagri-la: terraced gardens, wooded paths, a swiss chalet boathouse on a spring-fed lake, a pavilion in the form of a Greek temple. Rumsey built for permanence, but by the 1870s Buffalo’s smartest money was beginning to move a good deal farther up Delaware Avenue, benefiting itself of The Park and parkways that necklaced the city according to Frederick Law Olmsted’s grandest urban design.

Buffalo was now, and had been for some thirty years, the biggest inland port in the country and the third-largest American port of any kind. Its grain elevators, a Buffalo invention of romantic proportion, handled more grain than anyplace else in the world. Growth had stuttered during two severe financial panics in the nineteenth century, but with the evolution of rail transport and the discovery of iron ore in Minnesota’s Mesabi Range across the Great Lakes, *fin de siècle* Buffalo was a contender in American railroading and in iron and steel manufacture—also in child labor, periodic epidemics of cholera, and human misery.

The rich celebrated their fortunes even as they grew anxious about the foreigners whose labor—in the grain elevators, for instance, at \$1.50 a day—made those fortunes possible. By the turn of the century Buffalo was a true industrial immigrant city. The triangular district behind what is now City Hall—a place where in 1898, according to the *Buffalo Courier*, “many an influential man and prominent citizen may today point out the spot that holds for him the earliest and perhaps most sacred memories”—was known to some as the slum, to others as the Italian colony. Italians prosperous enough to buy or build a home were already moving up, and making the Lower West Side their neighborhood.

**Jimmy Vullo:** \* *I began drawing when I was eight years old. I used to draw here, right on the streets. I would draw in colored chalk, big drawings, and have an audience. I used to like to do*

*that. I have always been much involved in art—to this day—with a kind of wonderment, you know? I have never lost that quality, and I'm glad of it.*

*I used to walk along the barge canal, when it was there, with a paint box, and did the paintings of the alcohol plants—paintings of the fishermen shacks along the barge canal. That's all gone now. All these things were meaningful to me. Joe Suglio used to go out there with me. Arthur Kowalski, the late Arthur Kowalski, did paintings down there of trees, ramshackle houses. Charlie Burchfield did paintings along the barge canal when he was working in the Birge Wallpaper plant on Maryland Street [now the site of McDonald's]. He painted pictures right around here on his lunch hour. He painted three famous paintings on Niagara Street where the Shoreline Apartments are now.*

*The subject matter was there for Promenade, and then another painting called The Tower, and another called The House of Mystery. These three paintings were all done on Niagara Street between Georgia and Carolina. Then he did a painting on Seventh Street called Little Italy, and he did it from the roof of Birge Wallpaper—on lunch hour. Isn't that wonderful?*

*It's a coincidence that I also had painted one of the same houses that's in Promenade. I had painted it myself years ago not knowing that Burchfield did it. Because they were mid-Victorian houses. They were very interesting. And when I did research on Charlie Burchfield, I finally got photographs of some of the houses. I found an old elm tree that he had put in one of his paintings. I took a photograph of that tree. And, sure enough, a few weeks later down it came!*

*All that's left is the memories of this place, you know? The intangible. I'm not crazy about the Shoreline Apartments—boom, boom, boom, boom. As if you put your hand on a piano and hit the one note. Hit one note over and over again and you'd go man because it's so monotonous. And that's the way I feel about these houses. Like going down the Lackawanna [steel] plant and seeing those people living down there. There's a whole row of verandas. You think you're in a mining town again.*

*Now, on this street [Trenton, wedged between two apartment projects], sure they're frame dwellings but they're all different—sizes and shapes, verandas, no verandas, no yard, yards. The colors are all different.*

*I remember the days I used to go to see Joe Suglio about 4:30 in the morning, so we'd go painting. You know, 4:30 in the morning. I'd go and bother Joe. I'd wait for him till he got up and then we'd go painting. We'd grab our boxes, maybe like two Cezannes. And we'd paint buildings early in the morning. Set up the boxes, the taxi drivers out there watching us. It was wonderful. By the time we were painting, the sun was coming up. You'd see all that wonderful lighting on the buildings. All that downtown. It's all gone now. They've been cleaning up the waterfront and all the boats and the shacks and all that. Everything is gone now—all been simplified and grassed in there. As a matter of fact, they're building down there—schools are coming up. New waterfront marinas are coming up.*

Nostalgia is the mind's home movie. The past unwinds, the colors richer than they might seem if so much around them had no already faded to light. For the projectors of this past, no hard times are as hard as the ones they've suffered; no good times as ineffably sweet as the ones they've known.

Old-timers who remember the Lower West Side of the 1920s—even the 1950s—speak lovingly of homely things. Bread especially—the sweet bitterness of the crust—and wine, made in cellar presses from grapes piled in boxes by the hundred at the corner store. Sacrificial food, the private table re-creating the public rituals of a community. At St. Anthony's church, the spiritual center of the Italian immigrant neighborhood, festivals on saints' days transformed the area into what Jimmy Vullo called “a little island of wonder—all the lights and the silhouettes of the people, the sounds of the people hawking and all that, which to me was a carnival.”

Every now and again in such reveries the film slips, burned to yellow. “Especially as a Sicilian, you were a guinea,” a man told Milton Rogovin once, remembering Buffalo in earlier years. “I went for work at several department stores; the moment I mentioned my name—‘What part of Italy do you come from?...Next! Out!’ We were with Al Capone.” But the stinging memories of dead parents and grandparents are mostly not carried forth in the stories of their now-aged children. Perhaps the older folks had been tight-lipped, in the tradition of immigrants for whom past troubles have no place on the measuring stick of progress. And then it was all so long ago.

In his journal in 1923, shortly after his arrival to the Lower West Side, Charles Burchfield wrote, “Here is the place for an artist—to dream a dream enveloped in misery.” Some thirty years before that entry was made it might have been the motto for Buffalo's Italian immigrants. Most of them arrived in the 1880s, at a time when the city's nascent industry was not yet equipped to absorb them all. Some went into stone cutting and construction, into seasonal farm work in outlying regions of Buffalo, into peddling and the lowest-wage labor. Many could find no work at all. In 1892 Father Antonio Gibelli, the first pastor of St. Anthony's, wrote in a letter, “The day before yesterday a sturdy Sicilian came to me and, kneeling down, begged in the name of God to help him because he could not stand up any longer. He told me that there were five companions who could not leave the house because they were starving. He told me also that on the previous day they had one dollar and they gave it to somebody who had promised to take them to a job, but then he disappeared.”

In the oldest quarter of the city, poor Italians lived ten and twenty to a room, sleeping on the floor or on old doors supported by fruit crates. Men went scavenging, and in sheds alongside their dwellings women would pick through the flotsam and jetsam of other people's lives for anything of value. They cut the burnt ends of salvaged cigar butts, boiled the old tobacco leaves, spread them in the sun to dry seasoned with bay rum and tonka beans, then rewrapped the leaves into new cigars for sale or their own thin pleasure. Expressing the contempt of polite society, a Buffalo reporter in 1891 reviled the Italians, characterizing desperation as another of their curious “un-American codes and modes.”

Within seventy years Buffalo's official story of the immigrant experience had purged itself of the starvation; the arduous, sometimes violent labor struggles in which women too had

played signal roles; and the bigotry exercised not only by the city's elite but also by other, better-established immigrant groups. Italians had merged into the city's industrial economy, and their neighborhood, its locus having shifted to the Lower West Side, had become "colorful," even prosperous. "Un-Americanism" (historically a lively presence in Buffalo as a slur against Catholics, immigrants, blacks, anyone deemed threatening) had by then shifted to another group of Americans.

When local boy Frank Sedita, whose mother had picked cherries and father had swept streets, became mayor in 1958, it could reasonably be said that the community had finally come out from the shadow of City Hall. The days of sunshine were to be fleeting. In an act as momentous for the fortunes of the Lower West Side as its early settlement and commercial growth, Sedita expanded a campaign of frenzied "redevelopment" throughout the city, and made a ruin of his boyhood haunts.

The waterfront project of Buffalo's urban renewal scheme took in 292 acres—the shacks of the oldest immigrant colony and the well-built houses of workers and professionals in a section of the Lower West Side. Making distinctions might have suggested a lack of resolve, and the city's planners were being urged on, as if by a contagion, to bold action. The *Courier Express* editors deployed the rhetoric most vigorously, speaking of "the leprosy of deteriorating neighborhoods which appears to be spreading unchecked throughout the City of Buffalo."

Following the classic pattern, city, state, and federal funds were used to buy up and raze houses and commercial buildings. The newly vacant land was then sold to private developers at bargain prices in what was imagined to be a neat, swift blow against decay; only, in the case of the Lower West Side, it was not until nine years into the project that a purpose was found for the land, and not until five more years that the Shoreline complex was completed. Meanwhile, 747 buildings in the area were demolished, their owners meagerly compensated and dispersed. Renters were simply dispersed. Through it all, the newspapers tantalized a public kept in ignorance of the process.

The clearance plan for the Lower West Side was approved in 1960, but even before that many of the old Italians sensed their world about to collapse and sold off, some to Puerto Ricans who were not following the news in the English papers and thought their world was just beginning. Other old families simply moved out and ceased making improvements on doomed property.

Demolition began in 1966 and dragged on for years. "Clearance" was defined in the loosest of terms. Photographs from 1968 show scenes of devastation: mortar and nail-studded boards strewn about; trees sharing the same space with timber piled haphazardly; in the background St. Anthony's spire, in the middle distance a few houses seemingly untouched, and beside them a house with its roof torn off. People living just outside the condemned zone began seeing time as a bulldozer and moved out if they could. A few inside the zone hoped somehow to drop out of time, and opposed removal as long as they could. They looked out on the rubble of a place that had once represented their ancestors' dream of moving up and locked their doors, fearful of strangers who had wandered in from some other part of the city, a new generation of the dispossessed, scavenging for anything of value.

**Raul Hernandez:** *We came in '64. My father came to work in the farm, out in Seneca Creek. But he came here in 1955, and he finally decided that it was not right for the family to be apart. So he sent for us and we came to live on Busti—it was a neighborhood then.*

*That's where the Puerto Ricans lived. Italians too, but almost all the Puerto Ricans we had in Buffalo—it wasn't very many, maybe 100 or 200 families—lived in that neighborhood. Twenty-five Trenton Street; that was a building occupied by Puerto Ricans. And 88 Busti, the owner of the bar there was Sorrento, and he sold it to a Puerto Rican, Gonzalez. He was the first Puerto Rican to own a bar in Buffalo. I lived on the third floor of that building.*

*The houses were like you see here—stock frame, wooden houses, brick houses. They weren't gigantic homes or anything but they were good neighborhood houses. On Busti, 88, it was a three-story building, 1800s style, nice, sturdy, strong building. Of course, you had some old houses that were bad, but I thought that neighborhood was beautiful. Georgia, that was a great street. Now what do you have there? Projects. I had a grocery store right in Shoreline for about twelve years, beginning in about '81. In '81 it was okay, but now, you know, Niagara is a big street, so people come from all over: you've got gangs from the East Side coming across, and gangs from the West Side. And they get together in the summertime—sometimes 100, 200 kids—no control, right there on Niagara Street. Now, if that area had been the way it was—with Puerto Ricans and Italians in houses, not big open spaces—I don't think you'd see the same thing.*

*Now that I think about it, what happened back then shows how ignorant we were, that we didn't fight it. Because there we were talking Puerto Rican! Puerto Rican!—and boom! They destroyed our neighborhood. With the knowledge that I have now I don't think I'd let that happen again. In the '70s when they wanted to connect the Thruway to the Expressway across Virginia Street, then the Puerto Ricans got together and stopped it. Because that would have cut the neighborhood completely in half; it would have destroyed the West Side. In the '60s the Puerto Ricans didn't think about it; we didn't care. We'd move to Oxford and then to Virginia. To us, we just wanted a place to live, to be warm. We didn't own anything; we didn't want to be involved in the community. But now the Hispanic people are thinking differently. They are buying houses. We have three kids; they're all going to college. My parents' family—the Hernandezes—we're fifteen, the second-largest family in Buffalo. Of course, we're not perfect; there are problems in my family like in any other normal family. But that's not a big factor. Most of the kids are going to college or have graduated high school. It's not like before: we all quit school.*

*When I came, as soon as I turned sixteen I bought a car. I bought a stick shift to take it to Puerto Rico. I didn't buy the car to keep it here. It was a Road Runner. So my mind then was on Puerto Rico. But now it's all different. Now Buffalo is home.*

For almost anyone of a certain age on the Lower West Side, urban renewal sets a frame of reference. Like World War II in an earlier era, it can signal either the cataclysm or simply a point at which, it is casually recognized, history pivoted.

The Italians scattered: “Not only did they leave the area,” as Father Secondo Casarotto of St. Anthony’s puts it, “they left the area angry and helpless,” betrayed by their politicians, forgotten by Upper West Side Italians, failed by the Italian-American societies, which had long since abandoned their historic role of attending to the physical needs of the neighborhood. St. Anthony’s—the most venerable Italian institution, founded in 1891 by the Missionaries of St. Charles to help immigrants preserve their culture in an alien land—argued against this definition of “renewal,” but it was alone. Across town, on the near East Side, another Italian parish, St. Lucy’s, had already been destroyed in the pitiless Ellicott District clearance project, which left a twenty-nine block neighborhood once peopled by blacks, Italians, and Jews in a state of mangled vacancy for more than twenty years.

All this was jolting for the city’s young Puerto Rican population, though not disabling. Their past, not yet inscribed in brick and mortar, could still be carried around the block, into the future.

Puerto Ricans had had a community since the 1950s on the city’s East Side, at the edge of the Italian neighborhood there. Urban renewal largely stopped short of them in that section, only to catch up later with those who moved to better houses and apartments on the West Side. (Raul is not quite right in saying that in the 1960s almost all of Buffalo’s Puerto Ricans lived in the West Side, though the trajectory was clear.) The West Side Puerto Ricans didn’t scatter; once their homes started being leveled, they moved across Niagara Street, into chestnut lanes with variegated housing much like what they’d just been forced to leave.

Despite disruptions, Buffalo’s Puerto Ricans could pull out their measuring stick of progress and be glad. Less than twenty years earlier almost all the Puerto Ricans in the area were seasonal contract workers on the farms of Brant, North Collins, and other stretches south of the city—brought in by growers to field the harvest, housed in labor camps, and sent back to the island in the fall. In the best season they might make \$190 every two weeks, minus their board and plane fare. Others were migrant workers who lived in poor rural areas in Florida and made the trip up the East Coast every year with their children, following the harvest.

Puerto Ricans had been in Buffalo, though in tiny numbers, for years. The earliest family, the DeCastro brothers, had been cigar makers in the 1890s, and individuals had come in the 1940s to work in war production. But sometime in the early 1950s, according to the researches of Paula Alcala Rosner, they were motivated for settlement. The Puerto Rican government, in the throes of Operation Bootstrap, had negotiated cheap fares on generous payment schedules with U.S. airlines in the hope of thinning the island’s overwhelming population and thus hastening development there. A group of fifty men took advantage of this deal to come to Buffalo, and they formed the nucleus of a community on Swan Street on the East Side. Buoyed by factory wages, they called for their families. As the community grew, these men formed mutual aid societies—as the Italians had before them—to assist the sick, arrange funerals, provide food and money in extreme necessity, and generally smooth their compatriots’ adjustment to life in a cold climate, where the language confused and Puerto Ricans were prey to swindlers and loneliness.

Buffalo newspapers between 1953 and 1973 record a people's passage from disillusionment to pride, measured by the number of corner stores selling "exotic" produce and the exuberant crowds at the annual Virginia Street festival. As in all romantic stories, there is a layer of truth here. People on the Lower West Side now talk about their parents' sacrifices—mother and father working, cooking, washing dishes, picking fruit in the summers, pouring cement, laboring in the plants, making something of themselves with only a second grade education.

Raul Hernandez came when he was thirteen, and because of the language gap, at school he was put to drawing all day. His cousin was channeled to a school for slow learners, never managed to read or write English but, like Raul and hundreds of other young Puerto Ricans, was passed from grade to grade not by accomplishment but by age. Raul has owned at least six successful businesses and is starting another; he and his wife Maria, who works at City Hall, bought a house in the suburbs and lived there for nine years before returning to the Lower West Side. His cousin is a chef and has designed and built his own house. On such stories the immigrant legend is sustained.

But in those same newspapers over two decades a parallel truth could be read: discrimination (including the picayune variety—old Italians griping about curbside gaiety in the summer, indifferent snow shoveling in the winter); menial wages leaving nothing to save to buy a house; absentee landlords who could pay off their mortgages after five years and thereafter ignore maintenance while clearing a profit; a structurally weakened economy that could not absorb all the newcomers. In the same of redevelopment not only nearby homes but also shops and small factories had been demolished, structures that bind the urban spirit into city neighborhoods. The highway extension plan that Raul talks about would have uprooted some 2,000 Puerto Ricans. Until the community defeated it in 1976, the plan sat on the boards for more than twenty years, during which time many home owners, scared by what had already happened, either sold or let the property slide, reluctant to put money into something that might any day be condemned for public use. The Puerto Ricans, not so much immigrants as people displaced from a colonial outpost, had come of age as a community at the wrong end of the city's historical curve, and they would never have the old immigrants' luxury of forgetting cruel realities in a romance of time.

**Paula Alcalá Rosner:** *In collecting oral histories of those first fifty men, I found that to a man each one said, "I was the leader. I did it." I came to realize this macho thing—you know, you can never say you're a follower. There's a certain pride. You're no schlep off the street; you're a leader. And so everybody said they were a leader, and in a sense everybody was, because there were so many things that the community needed, and so many transitions, that a lot of people did a lot of different things that collectively had impact. I think over time a consensus developed that, yes, there was one leader, one man who really kind of set the tone and motivated people, and that person was Pucho Olivencia, but it took time. Talking to these men who are now in their mid- to late sixties, maybe early seventies, there's still resentment, and still jealousies between people—saying things like, "He took the credit but it was me who did it." It's just that they're older now and they're putting their lives in perspective and it isn't that big a deal anymore.*

*Looking at the experience of their sons' generation, in the 1970s, again there were about ten different men involved. Each one says that he was the leader. In fact, that's one of the reasons that the leadership of the community—the men—is polarized. The final thinking is still out on who is the central figure. I don't see a consensus clarifying itself for another ten years—similar to the process that their fathers had gone through. And people discuss it; they will gossip. How sincere was this one? How sincere was that one? How many hours did he put in? What did the wife say, did she complain that he wasn't at home? Was he fooling around and saying he was working? That's the kind of conversation.*

*So as far as leadership being fractured, yeah, the leadership is fractured. They're competitive with each other. And it's very difficult for women to maintain standing. It's my understanding that women who are smarter than some of these guys can never be leaders. In fact, the sexism is outrageous.*

*As far as the role of women in the family, it's a mixed bag. Women who come from factory environments tend to have greater parity with men. The big losers are women from rural areas, farmers—I mean, it's like slavery. And then there's something else. I'm second-generation Mexican-American, and I have been told that I can't really be Mexican because Mexican culture understands the natural inclination for men to spread their seed. And my response is, "That's the biggest crock of shit I ever heard in my life. What do you mean it's part of culture?" It gets me in trouble all the time, but then it gets a lot of women in trouble all the time.*

Dee Dee's dead. There's an echo there of the hit from *Superfly*, oddly fitting; one hears more 1970s soul on the streets of Buffalo than in probably any other city in the world—white people ice skating downtown on lunch break in the winter to “Me and Mrs. Jones” and the theme from *Shaft*. Dee Dee was a black Puerto Rican. Her man played in a multi-multi band, and in her living room stood a poster for a kind of rock-against-racism concert he'd featured in. Not so long ago she was hustling about her kitchen making a Cool-Whip cake for her daughter's birthday and saying she was glad not to be a teenager again given how the neighborhood had changed, how rough it had become. She couldn't have been over forty. The story is that she was in the hospital with a bleeding ulcer, that she begged her daughters to slip her liquor and wound up poisoning herself. But a man who knew her going way back says heroin, not drink, had always been her problem. Maybe she'd got off it and—like Billie Holiday, who was once busted for sniffing dope smuggled into her hospital room—started drinking. Either way, the word is that AIDS killed her.

Felisa Torres was a baby in a carriage when her picture was taken in 1973. She remembers the streets as her playground—magical, innocent even at midnight in the summertime—and says she's glad she's not a kid again. Felisa is in beauty school. She takes care of her two little nephews while her older sister works, much in the way that her sister had cared for her while their parents worked. She doesn't let the boys out alone at night: “There's too much that they can learn just from seeing it. Most of the time the drug dealers will use other kids, little kids, to go out selling for them. Most of them are...twelve? Twelve and up—anywhere from twelve to fifteen. At sixteen they can go to jail and be tried as adults. And some of those kids are

selling drugs for their parents. They want to help their parents out. They don't like seeing their parents poor."

In the 1970s the same streets that enclosed the carefree dreams of Felisa's childhood were for Dee Dee a place "to do business"—whatever it might be. Not twenty years later these two realities, once so very separate, had merged in the sweetness of "better days."

Past the cradle there is no gauge for innocence. The census leaves that to God and measures poverty instead: for the Lower West Side, a median household income of \$8,500, about \$10,000 less than for the city as a whole; half the population below the poverty line; more than 20 percent unemployed. This is not the poorest district in Buffalo—a distinction attaching to some primarily black neighborhoods on the East Side—but it is suffering. From out of government records tumble snapshots in numbers.

The area encompasses two census tracts. Both register low incomes, with 75 percent and 65 percent of households operating on less than \$15,000 a year. There is an illusion of progress, however modest, because household incomes have risen decisively since 1980. But move to the family portraits. There the income figures have dropped over ten years, and the poverty rate has correspondingly risen: by 28 percent in one tract, by an astounding 53 percent in the other.

No Lower West Side family racks up \$100,000 a year (though some individuals do), but more than a quarter of families have annual incomes of less than \$5,000. Their doors open into the Third World. In one tract three-quarters of families with children under five are in poverty; in the other it's over half. Most households are not headed by women on their own, but where they are, 90 percent and 70 percent of their little children are in poverty.

To Buffalo, experts come from time to time to lecture on the economic future. Manufacturing is finished, they say, and then speak blandly of the rewards that can issue from lowered expectations and the service trades. On the Lower West Side, where the weight of recorded occupations is already in services and retail sales, such rewards are a chimera. While wages have sunk, often to minimal levels, people's expenses continue to pile up. Virtually everybody rents: out of 4,684 housing units, 131 are occupied by their owners. Only this small group—presumably including the highest wage earners—spends less than 20 percent of its income on shelter. Of the great mass of residents who rent, the majority must spend 35 percent or more.

For Rent signs that landlords affix to neighborhood porches advertise apartments in sad buildings for \$300, \$325, \$350 a month. According to the census, the average is \$275; even at that rate the most strapped Lower West Side families would have only about a third of their income—or about \$140 a month—left for every other expense. The frantic calculations of the everyday play themselves out as, in a single year, many people move from place to place within the neighborhood, nomadlike, seeking something they can afford.

"They don't like seeing their parents poor," Felisa said of children working the streets at twelve and thirteen. Some of them just don't like being poor. In the nineteenth century they'd work in factories, peddle flowers or themselves; today they sell drugs. Most kids, of course,

don't sell anything. The statistics are like transparencies over their reality, over Felisa's, over Dee Dee and her children's. People who talk now about innocence forget that, as conventionally construed, it was never particularly compatible with the workhouse, or the almshouse.

**Adelmo Nati:** *They had signs at Bethlehem Steel when we first came from Italy: "We Are Looking for Help." In late 1955 or early '56 one of my dad's nephews, who was born here—their family had been here since 1920—said, "Uncle, I'll take you down to Bethlehem Steel." So he drove him down, took the physical and everything; they said, "Well, we'd like to give him a job but he doesn't speak English." So my cousin said, "Don't worry about it. Give me a job and he'll work with me and I'll tell him what to do." So they hired both of them.*

*Well, my cousin worked there thirty days or a little more, my dad got in the union, you know, so they couldn't fire him anymore, and my cousin quit. And my father, he had never seen so much money. I mean, we had just come from Italy and he'd come home with over a hundred bucks a week. You could buy food for a family of five for twenty bucks a week in those days. Where we lived on Sycamore and Ash—that's on the East Side; we came to the East Side first—my uncle owned the building. We lived upstairs and he had a store downstairs. So we'd shop there. That's why, soon after, my dad was able to buy a house. Interest rates were low== about 5 percent, I think. He sent money back to Italy too.*

*My dad worked swing shift; he did that all his life till the day he retired, never lost a day's work. And he never really learned to speak English. He can understand everything, but he can't speak too good. He never really had to.*

*When we moved to the West Side and my dad bought the house at 266 Hudson, I think he paid \$15,000. After I was married about a year, I bought the house next door, at 262. It was a little bit smaller; I think I bought it for \$11,000 or \$12,000—something like that. My dad, I bet you, he spent another \$15,000 to \$16,000 to fix his house. He was one of those guys who couldn't stop. He was always improving it, painting it. Every summer he'd be scraping, painting. He had a backyard where he planted peach trees and cherry trees. His house was probably the best-kept house in the neighborhood. The house next door to me, which would have been 260, Mr. Parisi lived there—and his house was immaculate. When my dad sold the house, in 1978, he sold it for \$15,000 too. So he didn't lose any money, didn't make any, but he did make money in the sense that he paid off the house and paid for the improvements with the rent that he got.*

*But then after we sold the houses, our heart was still there on the West Side. For a while, we still went to church at Immaculate Conception; we used to go see Martinez, who owned the corner store, 'cause we were really good friends with them. And we would like to go and see what the neighborhood looked like. And I'll tell you that within a few years after my dad was gone, both houses just started deteriorating. Like the paint would come off and nobody would paint it. Even now if I happen to be around the West Side I go up on Hudson Street, and there's a few houses that have gotten torn down. I shake my head and can't believe it because that was a pretty clean neighborhood, pretty well kept back then—especially in the '60s.*

*The neighborhood started to change probably around the late '60s. A lot of the old Italians were moving out—dying out, let's put it that way—and their kids didn't want to stay around. I wouldn't say it was bad, to be honest about it. We never had any problem. I had a good job as a machinist at Worthington; I was making good money. My kids always had a lot of toys. We had a backyard, and all these Puerto Rican kids would always come around and play with our kids. So we got along with everybody. If there ever was any problems, in fact, the Puerto Ricans would protect us. It was nice because from there you could walk to Niagara Street and there was Columbia Market; Tops was there. You could walk downtown. In the summertime the kids used to like to go to Front Park. They used to have a circus come every year, and the kids used to go to swim. For us, we had a really good time. But then my dad was getting kind of old and the house was a three-family house and we did have some problems with tenants. Lot of them were poor and wouldn't pay the rent. So eventually my dad sold the house—I think to an Arabian, who bought it for business; he rented it.*

Hudson is now a brave street, but it would not be mistaken as inviting. The brick porch from at 262 slams the door of memory in a single flourish of spray paint: “Just Say No.”

Next door, at 266, the landlord says only insanity can explain why he bought this house seven years ago for \$11,000 from the man who'd bought it from Adelmo Nati's father. He lives in Fort Erie, Canada, just over the Peace Bridge, which arcs out from Porter Street only a few blocks away. He had meant the house to be an investment. Since the purchase, he has had two heart attacks and open-heart surgery; he has had to stop working at Sears, where he sold washers and dryers. He looks to be not yet fifty, and he blames his poor heart on the house. The last tenant whom he evicted, after she hadn't paid the rent and others in the building complained of frequent suspicious visitations, ripped the doors off the kitchen cabinets and the phone jacks from the wall before she left. Now he can't find a buyer: investors aren't interested, and area people who would like to be home owners are either too poor or can't get financing. When he drives home after his occasional visits, he follows the main transshipment route for drugs between Canada and the eastern United States.

Farther along on Hudson, boys shift from foot to foot in front of a building. They work like postmen, however cruel the weather. A Puerto Rican man who once lived in the place tells of regularly exchanging blows with drug dealers who had made the building a thoroughfare. He calls them punks. The more senior managers of this trade, who make the real money, have moved to the suburbs.

Like sexual arrangements in a small town, drugs are a preoccupation on the Lower West Side. Conversations veer easily to the subject, transforming even the worst storytellers into natural tabloidists. Women and children are the preferred protagonists in what quickly becomes morality tales: the grandmother dealing to supplement Social Security; the eleven-year-old busted while on a run for his mother. It would be wrong to dismiss these simply as outlandish exceptions. A public health advocate who visited a West Side school not long ago heard four beepers go off in a fifth-grade classroom, another four in the fourth grade. Millie Luciano, who handles drug awareness programs at Hispanos Unidos, says that around the corner from Hudson the Tenth Street playground is “the backyard to all the drug soliciting and all the drug trafficking

in this area.” Signs on the playground gates warn, “Alcohol, Drugs, Gambling In and Around These Premises Is Forbidden.” Below one of these someone has slapped a couple of Nike stickers: “Just Do It.”

In the exchange of signs the overground community surrenders something to the underground. Encoded in postings for a “Drug-Free Zone,” a “Neighborhood Watch Area,” is the anxiety of a generation that knows the familiar, informal ways of regulating public behavior are spent. “There has always been a drug problem here,” people will say—“always” being a span of time not longer than about thirty years—but it was hidden. Discretion and shame still commanded their due. Today drugs are out in the open, capsizing the old-timers’ faith in the power of tradition—at least of the secular variety.

A block or so from 262 on Hudson Street, there is a blue cottage, its construction vulnerable with age, and beside its front door a statue, perhaps four feet tall, of Mother Cabrini, peering beyond the porch posts and out onto the street. Miniature shrines to St. Joseph and another protector whose back is turned decorate the porch rail. From behind a heavy-gauge wire fence a fierce dog patrols the yard. On a nearby street, inside this time, an old man’s dresser is crowded with St. Anthonys and Sacred Hearts, Blessed Virgins, Infants of Prague, a communion of saints garlanded with rosaries and silk flowers; at their feet, a padlock secures the top drawer against intrusions by the man’s prodigal son.

The statues, the holy pictures propped up in windows, march out to meet the iconography of the street: gangster writings in cipher—mystical, territorial, forbidding yet, like the saints, powerless except as a declaration.

“Everybody is afraid of losing their kids to the street. Both sides are competing for the child’s identity.” Paula Rosner was talking about aged Puerto Ricans, but the sentiment applies to old folks in the neighborhood across racial and ethnic lines. Yet to most old-timers, as to every outside observer, the culture of the street must ultimately be elusive—and only partly on account of the nature of the trade. It would all be much simpler if the newspaper’s one-dimensional crime-sodden Lower West Side were the real one; if danger drew boundary lines marking off the world of neighborliness from that of lawlessness; if “the street” to which so many fear losing their kids were not itself peopled with the community’s children; indeed, if gangster-rapper style—appropriated even by those Hispanic youths who set themselves like petty nationalists against their black counterparts—were not more often pure style rather than an emblem of outlawry.

Residents, as usual, draw boundaries all the time: houses to stay clear of, shortcuts to avoid, corners and crowds to cross the street before passing. (Puerto Ricans sometimes add to that list people to suspect, invariably Dominicans, castigated as a criminal lot.) Such delineations are highly personal, and influenced by age and strength as much as anything. But for the visitor to the Lower West Side, the distinctions are less striking than the accommodations.

On Seventh Street a group of black youths dressed like early railroad stokers assembles on the steps of a shabby house as if determined to intimidate. Back and forth in front of them race children on bikes, to whom they call out protectively. A few houses away a kid in a bandana

and oversized clothing washes down the sidewalk and speaks solicitously to a man who may be his grandfather, the very figure of Negro grace in suspenders and starched white shirt on a warm Saturday afternoon. Elsewhere, the sound of lawnmowers and the tap-tap of home improvement distracts only slightly from an angry quarrel—a white man slurring curses from an upstairs window as a woman dressed too lightly lets the screen-door slam. At day's end an older lady tips metal chairs against a porch rail like the proprietress of some shoreside bed and breakfast. The house next door is boarded up, its front yard groaning beneath a pile of wood scraps and car parts, old tires and TV's. On another porch down the street there are more tires, these slashes in a neat zigzag, mounted on old wheel rims and bursting with flowers. Friends gather for barbecue and Boriquen rhythms. At curbside two fat and beery men catch the last light to adjust the carburetor they've installed. Around the corner boys whisper to each other in a doorway. A pickup basketball game is ending at the playground. A flash car pulls up the far side of the fence and waits.

**Millie Luciano:** *I got this job based on my experience, because I'm also a recovering addict. I guess a lot of people just felt that why get someone to try to get the community out of drugs who's never been there and can't relate to people who are in it. Millie, they know Millie.*

*I was an addict for thirteen years. How did I get into it? Low self-esteem, I think. I had a difficult child life. My mother was always working, my father was always working, and there was never that kind of attention.*

*In the '60s it was acid, it was reefer; but then in the '70s heroin hit the town. A friend of mine gave me a couple of snorts of what was called back then scag, and I liked it. It got me sweaty, it got me sick, but I liked it. The first time I got nauseous, but after that you felt all right. You'd be high but you wouldn't have a hangover and I liked that feeling, so I just kept on doing it. I started doing this after two years of college. I stayed in school and didn't become an Addict addict, but for thirteen years I experimented with everything. I did heroin; I shot it up for two or three years straight through, without even phasing. Needles didn't come in until '79 or '81 and it didn't last long.*

*I guess I was just never cut out to live like that. But I did prostitution. I got arrested for prostitution twice—by the same vice squad. I felt real stupid—the same guy busts me for prostitution, I think, Aw shit. He takes off his hat and says, "Millie, don't you recognize me?" I wanted to die. And then they took me to the Rath Building. Judge Scott—Judge Scott and I are friends now, he refers clients to me—when I went in front of Judge Scott he had requested that I have an AIDS test. I remember that—this was in '79—no, it was venereal disease. They had me handcuffed at my legs and handcuffed with my hands back here, with an orange jumper. And there I was in the welfare building, going to get a V.D. test, and all my friends and everybody's there and people I knew in the community, friends of my mother, and I'm walking in chains and they're taking me for a venereal test, and everybody just knew that I got busted for prostitution. And I wanted to die.*

*So those things kind of helped me, 'cause I thought, Wow, I never want to go back to that lifestyle. And now the vice cops and I are friends, we sit on a task force together. They joke*

*around with me, they tease me. If I ever have a problem I call the precinct—I have a lot of friends. In fact, I put my son in jail. He was dealing at sixteen. I had taken his stuff to the lab, had it tested; it was cocaine. I came back with the police and put him in jail for like six days. So that hit the papers: USA Today, the New York Post. It was just a scandal. I don't even know how it happened, but I was in the police headquarters and I was bitching and hollering; I said, "I told you never to do this." And some news guy with a camera was there. Boom! They flashed it, and the next thing I know there it is on TV. And then the next day the phone was ringing—everybody's calling me for interviews. And then some talent scout calls me; they want to do a television story in California. They were willing to pay for the fare, give me \$500 plus pick me up in a limo, have hotel paid and everything; they would shoot for four days. So then the media was going crazy, I got fan letters, people from all different states telling me that what I did was the right thing, that it was out of tough love.*

*How can a mother turn in her kid? Well, very easily. When you've been there you know yourself what your kid is getting into. I'd rather see him safe in a prison cell than on the street with drugs. If he's gonna do it, he's gonna do it when he's on his own, but not while I can help it. Because I've been there. That's when that lady called from California. I talked to my son about it and he said, "Mom, you're going to go in front of nationwide television and drag out our dirty linen? You're going to do this to me? Destroy me?" I thought, forget it; he was more important. I didn't call this lady again.*

*He and I were cats and dogs for a while then. He was really scared of me, though. And he never tried it again—as long as he was living at home, until he was nineteen. I controlled that. I got my point across, and that's all I wanted to do. I have two boys: a sophomore at UCLA, my youngest, my nineteen-year-old; and my twenty-one-year-old. And, yeah, I'm concerned again about my oldest son. He's in the neighborhood; he's with friends. He dropped out of school, he doesn't have a job, doesn't have an income. He's got on public assistance because he has a learning disability. But it's not enough money. So, although he doesn't do anything in front of me...*

If the trajectory of a neighborhood can be read in its cars, then the 1970s, its Novas and Dusters, Buick Rivieras and Chrysler Cordobas, marked its last time that people of the Lower West Side had real confidence. Life may have been a struggle, but progress still clicked along with the odometer of a new car. That changed decisively in the 1980s, and today hundreds of families either buy used, go without, or accustom themselves to having the car on blocks out front under the ministrations of weekend mechanics.

Between 1979 and 1983 the Buffalo metropolitan area lost 41, 543 manufacturing jobs. The city achieved a dubious fame for the apparent speed with which its steel mills, foundries, auto and other factories—welcoming arms to generations of immigrants—shut down. Like urban renewal, deindustrialization cut like a scythe through the futures of the working class, and it completed the cycle of legitimized violence upon the black and Hispanic communities that began with that earlier dislocation. For, by comparison with that of the Italians and other white ethnic communities, their history in Buffalo's modern economy was just being written as the familiar complements to it were falling away.

There had been a black neighborhood in Buffalo's East Side since the 1800s. The city's distinction as the last stop on the Underground Railroad before Canada (with many a safe house on the West Side) had augmented its number slightly, but the first sensational boost in the black population—and the first mass black entry into the industrialized work force—came with World War I. That was repeated on a vaster scale in World War II, as 14,000 blacks went into the factories, and their population grew by 25 percent in five years. Despite some slowdowns and even serious jolts with the end of war production, postwar Buffalo had the optimism of a boom city, and it became a favored stop on the great migration of blacks from the South to the industrialized North. Already by 1940 blacks had established themselves on the Lower West Side, though this settlement represented only a tiny fraction of the city's black community. Between 1945 and the last 1950s the black population jumped from 24,000 to 40,000. By the late 1960s it had reached 94,000.

Numbers are harder to determine for the Hispanic population because typically people from Spanish-speaking countries are either undercounted or imprecisely identified in the census—"white," "black," "other," and even "Hispanic" being relative rather than exclusive categories. Newspaper accounts place a couple of thousand Hispanics in the Buffalo area in the early 1950s—many of them Mexicans living near the steel plants of Lackawanna—and by the decade's close they report that the Puerto Rican community alone tallied 6,000. Between 1966 and 1969 the public schools noted a 48 percent increase in enrollment of children with Spanish names, and in the 1970s the number of Hispanics was commonly set in the 10,000-plus range.

Jobs in heavy industry mainly drew these people, and became the bedrock of the black male working class especially. But for both blacks and Hispanics, their numbers and those of the city's economy were like signposts to different destinations.

The Buffalo historian Mark Goldman catalogues the out-migration of companies in the 1950s: Spencer-Kellogg, DuPont, National Anilene, Ford, Stanley Aviation. Between 1954 and 1967 the manufacturing sector shrunk by 26,000 jobs. The last leather tannery, the last shipbuilding company—historic Buffalo industries—shut down. Five flour mills closed in 1966, as did most of the local breweries in that decade. The 1960s are remembered by people like Adelmo Nati as the greatest time in Buffalo's history. And because wages were good, and because some companies were still relocating to the city, and mostly because for the greater part of the decade the steel industry was going full tilt, this was true for many in the working class. But in the summer of 1967, when people on the black East Side rioted and the ghetto began to burn, more jobs were being lost in manufacturing; parts of the East and West sides had been laid waste for "redevelopment"; and the white *hejira* to the suburbs (which Goldman says exceeded that experienced by any other city in the country between 1945 and 1950, and would by 1980 involve 180,000 people) continued to rob the city of tax revenue. An upturn in manufacturing recorded through 1970 was quickly reversed as Bethlehem Steel, its parent company shifting priorities elsewhere, began to bleed its work force by the thousands. The plant's almost total shutdown twelve years later would signal the crest of deindustrialization.

None of this is academic to the people of the Lower West Side. Conversations turn easily to the subject of jobs and the elementary problem of how people can maintain property or buy things to keep neighborhood stores alive when they have no money and few honest prospects of

getting it in expendable quantity. Among struggling blacks of a certain age—old enough and lucky enough to remember both the riots and what it meant to have an industrial wage—this question often seems to overshadow the question of race. The same goes for many Hispanics. Not that race is any less powerful to identity. Not that people do not carry the scars of racism, do not understand with piercing clarity their community's disproportionate suffering. But in this most heterogeneous area of Buffalo, race perhaps defers to class among those who can look at neighbors with whom they once worked side by side and witness the grimly equalizing effects of underemployment.

Such talk provokes objections from the generation that was born as the factories were closing. Young people will say racial lines are hardening. Racial gangs have made a reappearance. Only recently Puerto Rican gang members attacked a black who was dating the sister of one of them, prompting a face-off with black gangsters and yearlong rumors that “the Cali boys”—gangbangers from L.A.—would come to start a real war. Yes, there are many interracial friendships, interracial love affairs, they will say, but there is something else too; something black and bitter among kids who don't have much to do and who want what they cannot get.

As long as there had been giant industry, however crippled, there was optimism in places like the Lower West Side—thus the Novas and slick Rivieras. Indeed, even with all the misgivings, Buffalo remains remarkably optimistic. People point to a five-fold increase in Hispanic-owned small business in the city between 1982 and 1987 and imagine a day when Niagara Street might again be commercially vibrant. But perhaps for the first time in its history, Buffalo is also a city of realists. Despite a record number of people employed in the metropolitan area, those on the Lower West Side who work in the service sector do not speak of their jobs in the syntax of “renaissance” favored by city fathers. Those still in manufacturing do not underestimate the degree to which sacrifice has become part of their job description. Mo Nati, having worked at Worthington Pump for nineteen years when the company was bought and moved out of town in the early 1980s, decided to commute 150 miles to Painted Post, New York, rather than risk the job market. And those trapped in casualized labor do not fail to recognize its limitations. “When I work I don't drink, and when I don't work I drink,” a man named Michael on the Lower West Side once told Milton Rogovin. “It's that simple.”

Nor is God a generalized consolation. Within a two-mile radius in the Lower West Side six soup kitchens operate. Of those, only Friends of Night People, on Hudson and Wadsworth, which serves 10,000 to 12,000 meals a month—lunch and dinner every day to anyone who shows up—refrains from taxing the stomach for the sake of the soul. A few blocks away, at the corner of Johnson Park, the American Rescue Workers advertises its meal/Bible study schedule. The rough and cheerless building looks out upon a still graceful grouping of nineteenth-century houses ringed along a shady mall. Its coat of arms bears the motto “Salvation—Full, Free, Present.” To which someone has answered in large spray-painted letters “Liar.”

**John Grant:** *If you ride in my cab, believe me, you'll change your whole perspective on cab drivers. I am the cab driver elite: I open the doors for you; I get out if it's bad weather and it's old people to help 'em in the cab. I sometimes see other cabs and these old people are falling out*

*of the cab and this guy's just sitting there. What's up with that, you know? I mean, don't you think that someday you're gonna be old and hoping somebody be nice to you?*

*I've been driving for only about a year. It's an experience. How did I get into driving a cab? Actually, I was getting money from the government for an accident I had. So I was waiting for the money to come and then it wouldn't come the way it was supposed to come, and, you know, you still gotta pay your bills no matter what. So then I just got pissed off and I said, Well, the first job that comes along I'm taking it. Before that I was working at Fedders. We make car heaters and air conditioners, radiators. I worked there for thirteen years. But you see I got asthma. They didn't have proper ventilation. I worked with soldering; that made a lot of smoke, chemicals and, you know, I got sick. I had a bad asthma attack; they had to call 911 and come and get me. I was on the floor—dramatic shit, I'm telling you. Almost lost it, yeah. See, the asthma was real mild when I was small and as the years went on I took my medication and had no problem, but you know I was working where I shouldn't have been working. I had just come out of welding school, so I applied for the job. They needed testers and I told them I had asthma but, like, their need was greater than mine.*

*I was a silver solderer—lots of burning, lots of gases—and then the booths we worked in were like boxes. You were stuffed inside your booth, so if you don't have proper ventilation you're in trouble. After all those years it's a wonder it didn't kill me. You know, and we had a union—United Steel Workers—and we used to go out on strike about that type of thing, but, you know, those things just never seem to get fixed. And, hey, there's gonna come a point in time where you're gonna have to get back to work to feed your family—that's the bottom line.*

*I could show you some pictures of the conditions I was working in. You'll think it's like a mining cave—brutal, you know. But, see, at that time in my life I had just gone to court, and I have a son, see. My son is nineteen years old but he lives in Columbus, Ohio, now. Me and his mother, when we broke off, it didn't go so well, so I wound up taking her to court for custody of my son, got custody, had to take care of him plus I was still going to school and had to go to work to take care of my kid. So I had to put school on the back burner. And when a job offer opened up like that back in those days, you know, that was a good job—you know what I'm saying? That was like working at Chevy or something. We were making eight bucks just for starting, plus we made piecework. So I was making really \$11 or \$12 an hour when you counted it all up. And then we were working a lot of overtime—fifty-some hours a week. So I was killing 'em; I was rich. 'Cause I was working half a day Saturday too, and that's all time-and-a-half. We'd start at like 6 in the morning, work ten-hour days—I was crushing 'em, I'm telling you. And I had my kid too. So that was right on time to make that kind of money. Cause when he got older he ate as much as I did.*

*And so leaving there—I haven't recovered from it yet. Driving a cab, some days you don't make money, but some days when you make money you make real good money. But see, they don't give no benefits or nothing. And we get minimum wage; we get \$4.25 an hour to drive, and you know that ain't shit. You know what I'm saying? And then you're risking your life. 'Cause I drive good, and I almost got whacked a couple weeks ago. A lady hit me and she was going about sixty. She had run a red light. I heard a pop like a balloon pop and the window was in my lap. She drove me into two cars. I had to swerve to keep from hitting a lady with a baby.*

*That lady seen me coming; she dropped the baby and ran, just dropped the baby. It brings you right back down to reality, and for \$4.25 what are we talking about?*

*As far as crime, we're pretty safe because the people we drive are usually Medicaid—cripples and old people, call-ins. When you gotta pick up people on the street, that's when you gotta be watching. Then too a lot of people see how big I am and get a second thought, which is good for me cause I don't feel like dealing with that anyway. But you gotta be smart; you can't be picking up anybody you see. You can look at people and tell if they're—you know, you don't pick up two or three young kids with the hoods and the big jackets. You know, you're asking for trouble. Then too it doesn't hurt to keep a little tire iron under the seat just in case.*

Every golden age has its tarnished linings. Amid the reminiscences of once-powerful cities it is easy to forget that industrial work breaks bodies even as it feeds them. In the Lower West Side one-quarter of the working-age people report a work disability. Not all were hurt on the job; some were damaged by poverty or common accident. And—like the people in Lackawanna who say they'd trade their clean air now for the soot and sour stench of Bethlehem Steel if it brought their jobs back—among those who were hurt working, many would take the risk again for the security of brutal labor.

Even in the best of times the only choice for many people is a choice of dangers. In the worst of times choice is moot, and some are left just with dangers. In the 1930s the section of the Italian neighborhood then near the harbor was known to some as the Barbary Coast because of its attraction for gangsters, gamblers, whores, and drug dealers. The Lower West Side rated near the top in the city in murder, crime, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and disease, just as it does today. Eventually, as Pierre D'Angelo told Milton Rogovin in a conversation on Trenton Street back in the 1970s, “all those so-called gangsters withered away and there wasn't one of them that didn't have a horrible ending. Broke, poverty stricken, sick and all of that. None of them really made any money.”

Now a new depression age has brought a new era of gangsters, but as in the past neither their future nor that of the Lower West Side is settled. The neighborhood, like any other one, must finally remain something of a riddle. And like any other place, like history, it can be understood only through its contradictions. The Lower West Side of Pee Wee west's youth was a place of good neighbors and coherent blocks. It was also a place where Italian gangs were known to jump blacks who had ventured onto their turf. Pee Wee himself, who came up from Georgia at about the age of twelve and then had to escape from indentured servitude in the farms and canneries south of Buffalo, spent a lot of time, during some of the city's most buoyant years, as a drunk and a con artist. He no longer drinks, but trouble-shoots for his neighbors at the Lakeview projects, counsels their children about drugs and alcohol, arranges after-school programs, manages the laundromat and is on the board of directors, involved in youth services, in the city-wide Community Action Organization. (He was once a Black Panther, which may account for his adeptness at local organizing.) Not every story is as dramatic as his, but only the rare one follows a straight, uninterrupted line.

It will take another generation speaking of the past to create the narratives that define present days on the Lower West Side. Outside the Shoreline Apartments children practice cartwheels and scream with the wildness of their years. The precast concrete of the low buildings, arranged in sharp-edged groups like a playing-card village, changes its aspect up close—no longer gray but a profusion of pretty multicolored pebbles bound together in cement. The children gambol on grassy fields that once contained the mementos of ancestors and look out past a distant slice of highway, past the rooftops of condos for the newly rich, and onto the blue-gray breadth of Lake Erie, the tape recorder of their memories running.