

Generally, reviews of new ethnographies or methods texts are solicited and compiled by the New Ethnographies editor. The preferred form, unless specified otherwise, is an 800 to 1,000 word critical essay addressing theoretical, methodological, and/or substantive contributions of recently published materials relevant to ethnographic inquiry. Unsolicited reviews are welcome, but without the assurance of publication. Abstracts of Ph.D. dissertations based on ethnographic research and completed within the last year or two are invited. The abstracts should be succinct (200-350 words) and should highlight the theoretical or substantive focus of the research and the field methods employed. Please send book reviews and dissertation abstracts to Charles P. Gallmeier, New Ethnographies Editor, Department of Sociology, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN 46383.

## NEW ETHNOGRAPHIES

**THE COCAINE KIDS: THE INSIDE STORY OF A TEENAGE DRUG RING**, Terry Williams, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1989, 140 pp., \$16.95 (cloth).

Terry Williams spent many hours each week for 4 years hanging out with a small "crew" of mostly Dominican members of New York City's underclass who were drawn into the cocaine and crack trade. He got as close to their world as a professional scholar can get and came away with a good ear for their language and sharp eye for their worldview—replete with *machismo*, sexism, and entrepreneurial élan.

Williams makes no pretense of Olympian objectivity, preferring to deconstruct the crass caricatures that constitute official "objectivity" on network news and in politicians' pieties. He has a "point of view," but, in the best ethnographic tradition, it is simply that the ostensibly bizarre behavior of his "kids" appears reasonable, rational, and rule governed—that it *makes sense*—when viewed in its natural surroundings.

Since the latest war on drugs (at least on those used by poor people) was declared in 1986, America has been bombarded with media images of bejeweled Black brutes on ghetto streets greedily selling death on the installment plan. But through Williams's lens, this underworld appears less deviant than the media have led us to imagine. Indeed, as I hope to show here, there are clear continuities

between this subculture and the conventional world; these "cocaine kids" are quintessential Americans.

Much of the book consists of gripping ethnographic snapshots that flip from a kid's life history to a micropolitical economy of the local crack trade. We learn about the exigencies of careers in cocaine and the fit between this cottage industry and the community that tolerates it. Williams explains their recipes for crack and for managing thousands of dollars daily without benefit of banks.

We also see that most of these kids did not use crack themselves, despite its ready availability. Contrary to the pharmacological determinism that is always smuggled into public discourse on drug problems, these kids usually succeeded at controlling their own consumption because they had seen too many users lose it and it was bad for business.

Williams lets his kids teach us about "calling card coke" (samples to attract customers), the operation of crack houses, and the need to be "open" for business "twenty-four seven" (all hours, everyday). What shines through here is the often brilliant business acumen that some of these young people have developed for assessing the character of customers and co-workers so as to succeed in a tough business where "reputation" is all.

This interesting and readable book has many strengths, but there are a few weaknesses in the early going. Williams claims, for example, that both smoking crack and snorting powder cocaine produce "short-lived" highs "lasting only a matter of minutes" (p. 5). Everyone agrees that the high from smoking cocaine is brutally brief, but when snorted, the high lasts far longer than a few minutes. Is Williams reporting what his kids told him on this? If so, qualifications are in order. If not, how does he know? There are no citations to any literature in the book.

His history seems shaky on a few points as well. After making the debatable assertion that freebase, the precursor to crack, "first appeared in the late 1960's," Williams claims that by the late 1980s, "some 80%" of those who use cocaine do so in its base or crack form (p. 5). Crack use has spread far and fast, but snorting remains the predominant mode of ingestion almost everywhere in the U.S.

Similarly, Williams asserts that crack originated "in part" as a deliberate strategy of a "cocaine hierarchy" so awash in supply in 1978 that they tried to stimulate demand by enticing buyers with a "gift" of this new form of cocaine. This may have been the case for some importers, but there is no evidence that sales are coordinated across

hundreds of cities by a cabal. And it was precisely in 1978 that demand was growing most sharply. More important, other dealers and users claim that this form of cocaine was discovered serendipitously by sellers who were left with base as a by-product after testing powder for purity; only then did they learn to smoke the residue so as not to waste it (for other accounts, see Inciardi 1987).

Like most ethnographers, Williams had to make tough decisions on how much structural material to include to situate this slice of urban life. Although the result is a fine narrative momentum, he does not dwell on political-economic context. Williams rightly mentions early on the disappearance of entry-level jobs, and his life histories are rife with heart-rending hardships. He observes, too, that these kids were drawn to the trade "because they want jobs," the drug business being "a 'safety net' of sorts" into which they were "pulled by the flash and dazzle, and by the chance to make big money, and pushed by the desire to 'be somebody'" (p. 8). And he also correctly notes that the mandatory stiff sentences of the draconian 1973 Rockefeller laws helped create the first jobs for kids in the drug industry because kids did not get sent to prison. Yet beyond these points, Williams rarely speaks of the broader structural context in which the trade took on its allure (e.g., the urban fiscal crisis, racism, deteriorating city schools, or the Reagan budget cuts in every social program that might have improved the life chances of the "sizeable labor pool" of unemployed dropouts who wait in the wings for such jobs). While more analysis of structural influences would have fleshed out his story, Williams so well describes how the kids' world works that it is hard to fault him for his relative inattention to that world's encasements.

It is a small world not so different from the larger one in which it is ensconced. The kids want to "move up" their occupational ladder ("getting behind the scale" [p. 45]) so as to make "big money" and buy a "baby Benz"—just like the yuppie MBAs, lawyers, and Wall Street wheeler-dealers who often consume their product. That these ghetto kids seek the American dream by illicit means is less than mysterious at a time when greed had become the national creed and when legitimate opportunities were more scarce than usual. More remarkable are the vestigial values of family, home, and the dignity derived from a difficult job well done. While the rewards of money and drugs are important to these kids, so is "the desire to show family and friends that they can succeed at something" (p. 10). One sent most of his earnings home to his poor parents in "Dominica," while others spoke

eloquently of education and their desire for children. As much as fast money and flashy cars, what these kids sought and found in the cocaine trade was good old American success and the self-worth that stems from it. While most of their compatriots were "searching for dreams that most will never find" (p. 133), these kids had a shot, albeit one full of risks, and they took it.

Because "'Cultures' do not hold still for their portraits" (Clifford 1986, 10), Williams's extended, in effect, longitudinal ethnography is especially telling on careers. Despite the profits and prestige to be had in the dealers' world, most of the kids did not stay in it (cf. Adler 1985). One was shot; others got older. "I can't afford to do the things I did before"; the scene became "too dangerous," "no longer fun" (p. 132). Lovers pleaded and many drifted into community college and legitimate business. In the end, most who had some stake in conventional life—spouses, children, homes—chose to leave the drug world.

And in the end, *The Cocaine Kids* is a good read, full of thick description and insights. Williams steers a steady course between, as Geertz (1983) put it, the anthropological cousins of the statisticians' Type I and Type II errors—"between overinterpretation and underinterpretation, reading more into things than reason permits and less into them than it demands" (p. 16). One comes away feeling that one has gotten to know these "struggling young people trying to make a place for themselves in a world few care to understand and many wish would go away" (p. 132).

## REFERENCES

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