

Learn How to Play Chess
Fieldnotes Harlem 135th and 5th Ave

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It is Tuesday afternoon around 3pm, April 24, 2007 and I have just finished my anthropology class with Prof. Comitas. Armed with my field recorder, a small notebook, and camera I walk straight to 125th from Teachers. My destination this time is the intersection of 135th and 5th Ave where someone, for reasons unknown to me yet, has decided to make several chessboards available for use by anyone who wants to learn to play chess. As I reach this intersection looking bewildered a black man who doesn't even introduce himself to me asks if I am looking for any particular place. I quickly turn around not knowing whether or not I should tell him what I am looking for. Still in my bemusement I tell him that I am looking for the place where I can learn to play chess.

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He points at the place across the street wondering if there was anyone there. Instead of allowing me to proceed to the chess place at my own peril he decides to walk across the street with me. As we wait for the traffic light to turn green the man tells me about a place downtown on 129th street where I can also learn to play chess. He further recommends that I buy a manual with instructions from Radio Shack. As we get there I notice two chessboards: one is being used by two black men playing chess and the other lies idle. In addition to the two chessboards there are drums, bongos and flowers. The flowers seem to be the only thing displayed for sale. There is a little boy who is busy

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drumming on the other side of this establishment. He seems drawn into what he is doing and nobody really seems to pay attention to him.

Suddenly we get seated and the man offers to teach me chess and immediately gets down to business. He spends a few minutes explaining the basics of the game. We proceed immediately from theory to practice as he seems satisfied that I can try to move things around a little bit. By this time I introduce myself as Eckson from South Africa. He introduces himself as John from North Carolina. I start asking questions about this place, Learn How to Play Chess. He shows me the man who "owns" the place and further explains that the two activities, chess and drums, are intended to keep the children busy and off the streets. While teaching me chess, John talks about teaching chess in the classroom. I explain to him that one of my goals is to learn from them about how they teach chess, who they teach chess to and why people are curious about it if they are. He talks about integrating chess into the school curriculum without providing further details. At this time I make it clear to him that I sued to be a teacher and would still like to see how chess can be taught in school.

As the chess continues John pauses to evaluate if I have picked up some of the rules that he has just taught me. He asks me to do this and that and when I get it wrong he corrects me. I talk to John about my desire to return and learn more chess. He is very enthusiastic about helping me out and offers to meet up with again on Saturday 28, April 2007. Even though he promises to be there he also emphasizes that if he is not there someone will always be there unless it is raining. We shake hands and part ways.

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