

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Thursday and Saturday, October 25 and 27, 2007

Subject: Encounters with people on the street

Location: Frederick Douglass, between 120th and 123rd sts

Time: around 1pm, around 4:00pm

Thursday, October 25

I'm about to cross Douglass at 122nd when an elderly man in a faded black jacket and faded blue jeans calls out to me. I step out into the street when he says something like "Don't see many of your people around here." He says it in a friendly way, so I say something back to him and continue walking.

[Later, I think, I should stop and talk with people who make friendly overtures or comments, if they want to talk. I also think that until now, the only people who have talked to me on the street since I began this project are men who are hitting on me.]

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Saturday, October 27

Encounter with homeless man in wheelchair

Encounter with man and woman on 122nd Street

The homeless man first called to me at 121st and Douglass, from outside the liquor store I saw Red Coat go into last week. He asked, "Can you help me?" I mumbled "Sorry" as I hurried past.

There were a lot of people on 122nd. Young men, mostly. [I felt vaguely threatened—people looked at me but did not meet my eyes.]

The Halloween party was cancelled, moved to tomorrow. I made it to the garden and saw the sign, thought maybe I had gotten the day wrong or Haja had gotten the date wrong, and on my way back towards Douglass saw that nearly every door had a flyer announcing that the party would be *tomorrow*. Somehow I missed this on the way in. I decided to go to see if the next street, 123rd, also had those flyers.

On my way off of 122nd a man and woman were walking very very slowly ahead of me. I slowed down when I caught up to them. I looked up at a building on my right side, where a very dark, African-looking woman stood smoking a cigarette at the top of the stoop. She had a closed face. I noted that the door had no flyer on it and I quickly looked down.

Of the couple in front of me, the woman was much taller than me and wearing an enormous gray puffy jacket down to her knees. She had straightened hair that looked like a weave in a ponytail [looked too perfect]. The man was also tall, a little older, maybe 50s. He stopped, turned to the side [not quite facing me] and said, "Go ahead,

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sweetheart.” I thanked him softly, and walked past both of them. I heard the woman say, “Did I say thank you?” I must have misheard her because he said, “She did.”

On Douglass I ran into the man again. He joked, “Decided to come see me again, huh?” I liked that, and I now had time, so I turned around.

He was wearing a black knit cap, a black-and-gray plaid jacket, and had pants over the red long johns. His dark blue wheelchair had no visible motor. He had very dark skin, large rheumy eyes with a lot of yellow in the whites, and dry and cracked hands. He was thin, almost painfully so. He looked old, maybe in his 60s, but maybe living in the streets made him look older than he was.

He went into a long story about how he was just released from St. Luke’s [I think] pointing to his right leg, now a stump ending with a pair of red long johns tied into a knot not far below the hip. He started by saying that he’s not a panhandler, not looking for handouts. I let him talk briefly about being out in the elements and being wet, before asking him how *I* could help him. I was also conscious of the various passers-by, some of which may have seen me before. He said something about needing to get up to \$30, somebody just gave him enough to get some food, the first food he’s had [in the day? since being released?] and how he’s going to get a check and housing on Monday. [He named an amount of a few hundred dollars.] He said that he’d be able to pay it back, “with a little frosting on top.” I laughed at that too. I told him I didn’t have that much, and I hoped he would get up to \$30. I gave him \$5. He told me that he had asked another girl and said to her, “Am I invisible?” Because that’s how people made him feel. I murmured, “I can imagine, I can imagine.”

He gave me his name, James, and asked me mine. When I said it, he backed up, shouting, “Oh! Oh!” I asked him, “What did I say?” He started telling me about his older sister, who shared my name. I can’t remember what I asked him that got him to mention “my lawyer,” and I asked teasingly, you have a lawyer? He said he met a lawyer who gave him his card and said to call if there’s anything he could do.

Then he started talking about his family, 8 brothers and sisters, including a sister who is a professor in North Carolina. He hasn’t seen any of his family since 1988. He started crying talking about his amputation, and I got embarrassed and uncomfortable, especially with lots of people going by. He apologized and I suggested that we back off of the corner. [got the impression that it happened relatively recently, don’t know when]

He cried for a few seconds more and calmed down. He said that he did see one of his sisters here [presumably Manhattan, maybe Harlem], in some sort of program for heroin users, but hasn’t been able to find her: doesn’t know what program, doesn’t know where. He says he’s been here [again, where?] since 1974. I ask what will happen to him on Monday, and he says that there are hundreds of SROs in the city. I ask him if he will be assigned to one, and he confirms that he won’t know where. He hopes for Manhattan, “‘cause that’s my borough,” but he “could be sent to the moon.” Eventually he takes the hint that I want to move on, and lets me say things like, “I hope you get your housing and

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check on Monday,” and “I hope I see you again.” He asks for my card. I tell him instead that if he comes back to the neighborhood I’m often walking around. I ask him if he knows that little garden on 122nd and he brightens, says it’s real nice. I tell him I’m often there on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He seems excited. He thanks me for my compassion and I get embarrassed again. He takes my hand, and I tell him again that I hope he gets his housing. He asks for a hug, “even though I’m wet,” which I give him. When I leave I do not go down 123rd, thinking I’ve made a spectacle of myself. [what are the consequences of this? Will be interesting to see] I take the bus to my office.

At some point he had mentioned an organization or group having to do with AIDS, don’t know if he has it. He did mention being sick.

[I would be very interested in finding out the institutions he has to deal with, maybe NYCHA, welfare. This was a funny encounter. I usually refuse to stop to talk to men on the street, most of whom make noises of being sexually interested. Then, I kept interrupting him with questions and comments, which is not really my style but had to do with my discomfort at being so visible. He of course yielded to my interruptions but seemed grateful when I would check myself and allow him to talk—possibly a commentary on how institutional people treat him? He most certainly has had an education on and off the streets, and seems relatively harmless.

That I see him as harmless makes me face the question of safety. Eckson didn’t think I should be walking the streets of Harlem alone. I told myself that these were stereotypes about a dangerous inner city that no longer hold, that I’d be fine in the daytime. An acquaintance of mine who lives in Lenox Terrace refuses to take the subway there late at night; once she got off the subway late at night with me at 116th and took a cab home. I’m still apprehensive about being where I’m not wanted, and refuse to simply wander without somewhere to go. Especially after talking with Veronica, I see that our encounter is not one I’ve allowed myself—one unmediated by an institution, without layers of “protection,” but against what? Unpredictability, physical or emotional danger. Someone yelling at me. Making me face the kinds of feelings like the woman who resented me walking by without acknowledging her, my presence in the neighborhood, what I represent—I don’t know, and going to more institutions, as Veronica has suggested, may not be the most efficient way of finding out. Most certainly it points to a certain sense of safety in going through the institutions, but as in Baby College, my access is restricted according to the needs and insecurities of the institution. The conclusion for now? Keep on keeping on.]

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