

2 / Prostitution North

Watching the Game

By the time the federal government's street-based AIDS research and intervention project targeting Chicago's drug injectors was well established, nearly one out of four whose blood was tested was positive for HIV antibodies.¹ A growing concern for those whom injectors might be infecting through sex led to my being hired as an ethnographer focusing on their sex partners, which was a new epidemiological risk category. The multicity project was the scientific outgrowth of the late 1980s panic that the epidemic might spread from stigmatized risk groups to the so-called general population. Conceived in Washington, D.C., as the female non-injecting counterpart of male injectors, the sex partners included prostitutes who did not shoot drugs. Project field sites were chosen precisely because they were central copping areas for (male) injectors, so we found few prostitutes who did not shoot drugs. Field stations were set up at each site, and recovering addicts were hired as outreach workers. They created and nurtured the crucial communication channels ethnographers depended upon to find people willing to talk about illegal behaviors (Sterk-Elifson 1993).

Forty-seventh Street and Martin Luther King Drive is a busy intersection in the heart of Chicago's southside. It is also the location of the field station administered and staffed by African Americans to target the African American community. (Just as Latinos were hired

0 miles 0.5 1.0

SECTION OF SOUTHSIDE
CHICAGO

FIELD STATION

scale 1:40,000



to reach the Mexican and Puerto Rican communities on the westside and whites were hired to reach the predominantly white communities on the northside.) Fifty years ago, the neighborhood around the southside field station was a booming center of diverse economic activity (Drake and Clayton 1970). By 1990, over half the people in the area were below the poverty line. The cement towers of Robert Taylor Homes are nearby. One of the largest housing projects in the United States, it is home to tens of thousands of people who can barely glimpse the economic horizons enjoyed by those in the glass and steel towers in the center city loop (Johnson 1994). The illicit drug and sex trade has devoured this landscape and many of its people, and HIV is raging.

George Lewis, also known as Loki, was an outreach worker for the project. He has since died. Loki's memory evokes in me the intense mixture of joy and pain, artfulness and decadence, that characterized my experience of being with folks in and around the southside field station. He was a talented toast-teller.² Although we didn't work together regularly, he did line up Jacqui, my first interview. Excerpts from field notes and interview transcripts offer a sense of the narratives of hardship I recorded.³

They knocked on his door at two in the morning asking for condoms. The twenty-two-year-old woman and her man worked across the street from Loki's house in the south Sixties of Chicago. Angry about being awakened, he told them he never has condoms after ten at night. After they left, his conscience got to bothering him, and he got dressed and went downstairs to give them the condoms. The couple had already returned from buying three for two dollars at the drugstore. They were upset about a woman working out there who was HIV-positive and wasn't using any.

Not long after that, Loki brought them into the field station on Forty-Seventh and Martin Luther King Drive. The man stayed in the

reception area with their two-month-old baby and the woman came into one of the back rooms to be interviewed. She was a slip of a woman with a gentle, beautiful, bruised face, and the raggediest skirt and blouse I'd ever seen outside of the bus terminal in Peshawar. She said that she didn't inject drugs and her man didn't either. But half her tricks did and she did about ten tricks a night. Without counting for time off and seasonal variation, that was a total of about thirty-two hundred tricks a year.

First we went through the government's quantitative surveillance interview. I learned that she was a bisexual, Baptist, high school grad. She worked sex full-time and had her own apartment, which she shared with her man and her two-month-old child. She also had a two-year-old who didn't live with them. Her drug use history was limited to occasional alcohol and marijuana. The majority of her clients were men, although she also performed unprotected oral sex on women. She knew that at least nine men and six women clients were injectors. Like most of the prostitutes I talked to, she reported using condoms with everyone except her boyfriend. She began this discipline three months after she started sex work as a result of a case of gonorrhea. She was in good health; she found herself in jail about once a week; she had donated or sold blood after 1979. With this interview completed, we tape recorded a free-form life history interview focusing on sex and drug-related HIV risk. I asked her what it was like the first time she had sex, a standard opener. I was unprepared for what she said [my questions and interjections are in brackets]:

■ When I first had sex I was raped. [By whom?] I don't know. [Some guy on the street?] I was coming home from the store. He asked me, he said, "Have you seen a ring, a diamond ring around here on the ground?" I said, "No." So he said, "Well, can you help me look for it?" I was ten years old, I said, "Okay, I'll help you look for it." He said, "If you find it for me I'll give you seven dollars." I said, "Okay." So the

seven dollars perked up my urge for helping this man find this ring. So he said, "Well come on over and walk over here to this store with me." So I walked over to the store. The store happened to be by an alley. So we got in front of the store, he grabbed me and pulled me in back of the alley and told me to be quiet. It was some little kids back there and I hollered. So he twisted my ear and he gagged my mouth and he started choking me and took me down to the basement. He raped me and all, blood started coming out of me. He raped me front and back. That was the first time. Then after then I just been wide opened. [What do you mean?] My vagina haven't closed back from that cause I was ripped and he was real big, he was a real big guy. . . .

They took me to the hospital and they tried to look for the guy. Right now today I see this same guy around my parents' house. The first time I seen him again, my father ran over there and beat him with a bat. They called the police and they had him locked up and a few hours later he was out walking the streets again. Ever since then, I been having sex. I started working on the street about a year and a half ago. I met this guy, the one that is here with me now, he was telling me how it was and it all sounded so good coming from the mouth. You get out on the street and it's a different thing.

Jacqui liked the guy she was with, and he asked her to catch tricks for him so she said okay. She isn't looking for another kind of work, because this money is faster than any of the straight jobs available to her. At \$15 to \$20 for a five- to six-minute job with condom only, she clears an average of \$150 to \$200 a night off-the-books. The condoms are negotiated up front, along with price and sex act. When I asked if her clients give her flack, she recounted this event. It took place in a drunk's car near the stroll on Seventieth and Western:

■ Yes. . . . Sometimes they will say, okay [they'll use a condom], and then when we start to date, they will try and slip it off. And when they slip it off, I leave. I take the money and everything and leave. I still have

static with them and so we get on the street and we get to arguing and stuff like that. Just like a man bit me in my face right there. . . . He bit me, about forty dollars, a white guy. . . . He wanted a half and half, right. [What does that mean?] That consists of oral and regular sex. [But he only comes once? He starts in the mouth and he switches, or the other way around?] Right. He said he was suppose to get two satisfaction, two nut full [orgasms], right. So I said, "Nah." So he said, "Well bitch give me my money back!" I said, "Nah it's not happening like that." I tried to grab the door and get out . . . he grabs me right here in my face with his teeth and just start biting. It hurt and I bit him back. So we both got marks.

[So do you have all kinds of people coming to you, like white guys, black guys, Hispanic guys?] Yes. [You have regular customers?] I stopped having regular customers, because regular customers are more problems than just picking a guy off the street. Because a regular customer, he tends to want deals, he wants to give you half the money this time. Half the money next time. Some of them will fall in love with you. I had a couple of them that fell in love with me. I had to leave them alone. They would come down while I'm working and acting crazy and what not. Telling me to get off the street and pulling me, pulling my clothes and what not. I had a lot of them like that before. This life is crazy, believe it or not.

Whether on southside, westside, or northside strolls, Jacqui said that tricks come by all night long—although the south Sixties area tends to have more women than tricks. If she doesn't run out of money in the daytime, she'll start work about eleven at night and stay out until five in the morning. Tricks be out there all night, she said. Most come out after two in the morning and stay out till seven. They be out there, these men with jobs and wives:

■ . . . especially on the weekends. I just see more traffic at night on weekends than you do in the daytime, because everybody be at work