

Duneier, Mitchell, Philip Kasnitz, and Alexandra K Murphy, eds. 2014. *The urban ethnography reader*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## 50

### HAKIM HASAN

#### AFTERWORD

##### from *Sidewalk* (1999)

Sometimes the data talks back. Hakim Hasan, a book vendor in Greenwich Village, was a key figure in Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalk*. Following the completion of the book, Duneier asked Hasan to write an afterword about his experiences being a research "subject" (which Duneier did not see until the book went to press).

The streets that are the focus of these pages are places of metropolitan refuge, where the identities of the men and women who work and live are hidden in public space. In the pedestrian's eye these men and women are reduced to a horrific *National Geographic* photograph come to life. It is as if they were born on these streets and have no past, or other life experiences.

My decision to leave the corporate world and sell books on Sixth Avenue was incomprehensible to my family and friends. One of my black former co-workers saw me selling books one evening, walked over to me and asked with comic disbelief. "So this is what you are doing now?" I did not want to answer this embarrassing question, so I replied, "No. I'm just watching the stuff for a friend of mine. He went to the bathroom."

In effect, I went into exile on the street. I began the process of exile long before I arrived on Sixth Avenue. In an attempt to avoid the everyday formalities of corporate life, in 1988 I began working as a legal proofreader on the night shift in the word-processing department of the law firm Robinson, Silverman. Nothing made the futility of my efforts more evident to me than an incident that occurred one evening when I had no work to do because of an upcoming holiday. I sat at a secretary's work station and read a copy of *Business Week*. A white attorney walked over to me. He leaned over my shoulder, saying not a word, and began to read. The crumbs from the popcorn he was eating fell on my



head. I thought to myself. “Man, I should stand up and slap this guy senseless.” In the moments that it took for me to weigh this option, I imagined paramedics working on his limp body and a phalanx of television reporters and police officers interviewing my co-workers in the corridor. I did not say a word to him. My silence was simply another in a series of concessions I made to those who provided me with my daily bread.

I was abruptly fired during an employee-review meeting in 1991 by the director of administrative services, a middle-aged white woman. Why? I had been accused of being incompetent, she said, by an attorney she refused to identify. I still remember the cadence of her words: “I’m so sorry, but we’re going to have to let you go,” as if it were a refrain to a song: and I recall the way I sat in a chair opposite her desk, statue-still, paralyzed by their unforeseen and immediate implications. I recall the way she stared at my face and the way my silence prompted her to say, “You seem to be taking this so calmly.”

The director of administrative services was not my supervisor. How did she conclude that I was incompetent? What were her criteria? I worked on the night shift and saw her rarely—only when she was working late. The night-shift proofreaders and word processors had very little contact with her or the members of the legal staff, as it was my supervisor’s responsibility to deal with them.

Prior to this meeting, my supervisor and I traded the normal office banter. She never gave me any verbal or written notification, during the time she was my supervisor, that my work was not satisfactory, nor was she present at the meeting.

Incompetent? What about these three years, working under deadlines and enormous pressure, proofreading legal documents inside a room the size of a prison cell with three other proofreaders? The director of administrative services believed the expression on my face was one of calm. It was an expression of shock. That night I left this insular world in order to salvage whatever was left of myself and forge a new identity.

Mitchell Duneier recalls that he was thoroughly surprised when, during our first conversation at my book-vending table, I told him that I had a Rolodex. His surprise was a matter of social context. But what if I had not mentioned the word Rolodex to Mitch? Because the word Rolodex is associated with people who work in offices, and because I was perceived as a “street person,” my use of it stood out. It caused a shift in Mitch’s perceptions of me. I am now inclined to suggest that this book would not have been written if it had not been for this conversation, which challenged his assumptions about me and my social status.

In the first chapter Mitch recalls his difficulty in convincing me to become a subject—at that time the sole subject—of the book. Indeed, I found myself hearing the decree of my mother, whenever she had to leave my siblings and me at home alone: *Do not open the door for anyone while I’m gone.*

If I defied the maternal decree and opened *this* door, on what basis would I weigh Mitch’s intentions? How could I prevent him from appropriating me as mere data, from



not giving me a voice in how the material in his book would be selected and depicted? How does a subject take part in an ethnographic study in which he has very little faith and survive as something more than a subject and less than an author?

Because I believe my disastrous experience in the corporate world was the effect of racism (a claim many whites these days liken to that of the proverbial boy who cried “Wolf!”), I asked myself. “Can I expect Mitch, as a white sociologist, to understand why that experience led me to work as a book vendor on Sixth Avenue in the first place?” The idea of race as a lived experience could not be avoided; at the same time, if I made the mistake of denying Mitch *his* humanity on the basis of race, without giving him a fair chance, there would have been no way for me to know whether he could write about my life accurately.

I did not know how Mitch would construct an account of my life on these blocks. Would he conduct his research as a descendant of a sociological tradition which historically has found it all but impossible to write and theorize about blacks, especially poor blacks, as complex human beings? I worried this way, oddly enough, even after reading Mitch’s book *Slim’s Table*, despite its insights into the lives of working-class black men, because my life, not the lives of the men depicted in that book, was at stake.

Over several weeks, I talked with Mitch informally at my book-vending table, and whenever possible at a restaurant where we could speak candidly without being interrupted. These exploratory conversations revolved around the basic facts of my life and, more to the point, the circumstances that prompted me to become a street bookseller, and they were emotionally charged. Mitch did not react to what I had to say with the cool, clinical detachment I had imagined to be the sociologist’s stock-in-trade. He listened attentively. I came to respect his sensitivity, and soon I trusted him to write about my life.

After reading the original manuscript three years ago, I concluded that the events and conversations that took place at my book-vending table could not convey, by themselves, the complexity of the social structure that existed on these blocks. I sent Mitch a long, handwritten letter outlining my concerns. I expected him to think I had overstepped my bounds as “subject.” True, I knew Mitch’s research agenda had been shaped by my reference to Jane Jacobs’s intriguing idea of the “public character.” But, since I was a subject, how far did my right to theorize go?

Not long afterward we spoke on the telephone—I from a public telephone as I watched my table, he from his office. Mitch told me that he appreciated my sociological insights and that he was grateful for the letter. He wondered aloud if it might be productive for us to co-teach a seminar where we would discuss the issues raised by the book with students and each other. Shortly thereafter, Mitch received permission to invite me as a paid lecturer to co-teach a ten-week undergraduate seminar with him. This course marked the beginning of a process whereby the other men and women on Sixth Avenue would no longer be mere data.



I literally found myself selling books on Sixth Avenue one day and on the next seated opposite Mitch at a huge conference table at the University of California at Santa Barbara. This was new terrain, since I had no formal experience whatsoever teaching in a university environment. Up until that point, I had jokingly told Mitch that the sidewalk had been my classroom, so to speak, and that I was contemplating charging tuition.

The nineteen students whom Mitch and I had selected on an “instructor approval” basis to enroll in this seminar represented diverse ethnic backgrounds and demonstrated a keen interest in the way the seminar was structured, as well as a willingness to tackle an arduous series of reading assignments. Race, of course, was an unavoidable component of our meetings. This was due to the choice of reading materials and to the issues that emanated from the street.

We encouraged class participation based upon the assigned reading materials so that individual seminars would not be reduced to “rap sessions.” The reading material we assigned was twofold: some books provided structural and conceptual understanding of issues of street life (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, *Streetwise*, *Urban Fortunes*, and *The Homeless*), others were “black books” that working and middle-class blacks purchased at my book-vending table (*Pimp*, *Dopefiend*, *Volunteer Slavery*, *Africa: Mother of Civilization*, *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, *Breaking Bread*, *Race Matters*, and *Confronting Authority*, to name a few).

Co-teaching this seminar with Mitch was not easy. Not only was there a tremendous amount of preparation involved, but it gave me a firsthand understanding of the magnitude of his responsibilities as a college professor. Teaching undergraduates, where a professor must contend with the occasionally base intellectual instincts of some students, is a difficult enterprise. Standards and critical thinking are of the utmost importance.

I was given an office in which to work and conduct meetings with students during my office hours. Before each of the first four seminars, I would sit in my office stricken with such anxiety that I would find myself taking two Tylenols to help ease the onslaught of a headache, even though I had spent years at my book-vending table conversing with ordinary and famous people day after day.

And yet I adapted easily to this new social context. The seminar proceeded wonderfully, with Alice and Marvin visiting us in the middle of the academic quarter for two weeks. What became evident from the questions and responses of students was the shortcomings of the book. Why were the lives of the magazine vendors not included in the first draft? What about the panhandlers? What about homelessness? Why didn't these people simply find jobs? What did the whites have to say to these people? What were their interactions like with neighborhood residents? How did I get my books? Could a white professor really be trusted to write about black men without succumbing to stereotypes? These were difficult questions, and Mitch and I talked about them at length in between



sessions. As a result of the seminar and our conversations, Mitch began writing this book all over again, returning to Sixth Avenue to document the lives of the other men.

My telephone communiqués back to New York proved to be meaningless as Alice recounted the general assessment of my trip to me. The men on Sixth Avenue could hardly believe that I was actually co-teaching a class with Mitch. They thought I was in Santa Barbara vacationing and enjoying the high life.

The social hierarchy of the book vendors and magazine vendors was characterized by long-standing antagonisms (as described in the chapter on the space wars), and I had a good but far from perfect relationship with the magazine vendors. In order for Mitch to gain access, he needed a sponsor among them—both to help him gain their trust and to ensure his safety. This is why Marvin was crucial. As a sponsor, he had greater credibility than I would have had, because he and Mitch had had no prior relationship.

Marvin and I briefed Mitch on what to expect and avoid as he initially moved about these blocks conducting fieldwork. Many of these men believed that Mitch was “rich” (that is the word I often heard) and they were prepared to take advantage of him. On these blocks, life is measured on a day-to-day basis, often in terms of the money one can obtain from people of goodwill. In those early days of fieldwork, the question of whether or not Mitch was really writing a book about the meaning of their lives was secondary. Their question was: How much money can I get out of him?

Some of them had earned as much as one hundred dollars apiece selling magazines the day before, but had spent that money on crack or alcohol before dawn. They invariably asked Mitch for money to buy breakfast, which had a variety of shaded meanings: a two-dollar ham, egg, and cheese sandwich from Gray’s Papaya, a bottle of St. Ides malt liquor, or a hit or two of crack.

As far as money goes, none of these men were aware that Mitch had covered all of the costs associated with the research for this book out of his salary. He did not have a research grant, and would not wait to get one before conducting his research. Marvin was shocked when I told him this, but I knew that it would not have mattered if I told it to the other men.

Mitch eventually learned how to say no to requests for money from seemingly desperate people. He established goodwill through his seriousness of purpose and sincerity as a sociologist. I watched him gain access to the magazine vendors as I periodically peeked around the corner from my table and sometimes looked from the second-floor window of Userfriendly (a pay-by-the-hour computer center, now closed). I could see him working for Marvin and slowly but assuredly easing his way into the life that existed at that table. There was an “invisible” social world there unknown to most pedestrians and, as I would later learn, even to me. Through intensive fieldwork, Mitch managed to document this subtle and complex social structure. It is fair to say, in retrospect, that his reception among these men was actually far easier than I anticipated it would be.



Alfred Robinson, who was among the “first generation” of men to make their lives on Sixth Avenue, told me that Mitch would have become a “victim” on these streets had there not been a consensus among the men and women that what he was trying to do was important. In the end, any sociologist who simply believes that time spent in the field qualifies him as “one of the boys” is not only sadly mistaken but in grave trouble. The street is the street. Make no mistake about it. Mitch understood this from the outset. He never pretended to be anything other than he was: a human being and sociologist attempting to understand the meaning of our lives.

Not one of these men or women (including myself) had any coordinates for this kind of undertaking but in order for Ovie Carter to photograph these men and women, they had to put their faith in him too. People who work and live on the street, as a general rule, do not like, let alone permit, photographs to be taken of them. Some do not like the idea of their lives being reduced to a tourist attraction, while others see photographs as an aspect of police surveillance. Many think that unless they “get paid” the photographer is “getting over” on them.

Ovie is a black staff photographer for the *Chicago Tribune*. He is a soft-spoken man who has spent over twenty-five years photographing the inner city, with a particular focus on problems like drug abuse. This would be the third major project on which he and Mitch would collaborate. I can say with assurance that Ovie’s status as a black man was not the sole criterion for his admission into the lives of these men and women. Jamaane, for example, initially expressed his reluctance to be photographed. I recall Ovie talking to Jamaane about his reluctance in front of Store 24 (now Go Sushi) on Greenwich Avenue, the very block I work on. It was an intense yet cordial conversation. Within fifteen minutes, Jamaane changed his mind. Jamaane, who is a man of great integrity, had come to respect Ovie and his intentions as they related to this project. The wealth of Ovie’s Chicago experience photographing men and women very much like those on Sixth Avenue had never really occurred to me in my own assessment of how he would manage to be accepted on these blocks. Compared to Mitch’s, his rapport with the men and women was almost instantaneous.

When Mitch had written another draft of this book and photographs had been carefully selected, he came back to New York, rented a room at the Washington Square Hotel, and brought each and every man and woman involved with this project there. He read chapters of the book to them and solicited their opinions. This was not easy, but it proved (particularly when everyone involved had heard their own words) that the book was a work in progress that portrayed their lives accurately. Mitch had made his own judgments after listening to everyone first.

There was no way for me to know that my desire to survive as something more than a subject and less than an author *would* influence the way this book was conceived and written. Let me elaborate my determination to participate in this project forced me to



discover that a dialogue with Mitch, in his capacity *as a social scientist*, was possible. This was no small achievement. This was a departure from the “scholar knows best” paradigm. The romanticized idea of “the subject’s voice” that I often hear about from graduate students studying at New York University and the New School for Social Research who come to my table is one thing. The radical willingness of the social scientist to listen is quite another.

Mitch’s research compelled me to realize that I knew less about the lives of the men and women on these streets than I thought, although I had spent years working right next to them. For instance, I was quite surprised to learn that a sub-group of these men had actually known one another for over fifteen years and had “migrated” to Sixth Avenue after having lived in and around Pennsylvania Station. Because of social distinctions that exist between the magazine and book vendors, I was not privy to this fascinating information. Had Mitch failed to talk to each and every man who inhabited these blocks, there would have been no way to determine, let alone document, their shared history and their migration from Penn Station to Sixth Avenue. The story of their migration raised profound questions for me, since it demonstrated their tremendous adaptability and ability to create a milieu in public space in which they could survive. Perhaps, in the final analysis, migration of any kind is a story of survival and adaptability. But this seems never to occur to people who encounter these persons, including policy makers, who think street vendors can be eliminated with laws that cut vending space or ordinances that make the world less comfortable for them.

When I read the first draft of the chapter “A Scene from Jane Street,” I found it unimaginable that Billy Romp and his family are allowed to live in a camper on Jane Street (an unusually narrow street, no less) and that residents think so much of the Romps that they give them keys to their apartments. I explained to Mitch, I have never been offered keys to any resident’s apartment, and even if I were, I doubt that I would have accepted. The limitations that I place upon trust would not allow me to do so. Maybe this is not important. What is important is the keys, which symbolize that the Romps are accepted by the residents.

The juxtaposition of Ishmael being told by the police officers that he could not sell his magazines on Christmas day and Billy Romp selling his Christmas trees made me angry. Let me say something about the comparison between Billy Romp and me as public characters: while it is admirable that he is widely accepted on Jane Street, and undeniable that his presence creates a sense of “eyes upon the street,” the role I came to play on Sixth Avenue is markedly different from his. Without the signs of race, class, and family stability (I have no children) that might have allowed me to gain immediate acceptance on Sixth Avenue, I had to earn my place there through my wit, presence, and perseverance. There is no indication that I, or any of the other men and women, have ever been accepted altogether on Sixth Avenue.



Despite the fact that it was a labor of love, working on the Avenue for over seven years took a toll on me. Two days after Alice handed me a letter on the sidewalk notifying me that our relationship was over and that she was romantically involved with another vendor on *our* block, I decided to leave Sixth Avenue. While this news was a precipitating factor, I had endured poverty and the lack of health insurance long enough, and the prospect of entering middle age with no financial security was frightening. I had to leave.

My departure from Sixth Avenue was no easier than my arrival. One does not spend seven years working on the sidewalk and make a swift foray back into the formal economy. I thought that I could. My attempt now to move into publishing, public school education, or urban policy research is marred still by bitterness and my contempt for corporate whites who thwarted my ability to simply earn a living, which is what brought me to Sixth Avenue in the first place. This conflict between my aspirations and my bitterness is the essence of my story. It has not been resolved. It may never be.

I am still trying to understand how Mitch and the people whose lives he documented developed relationships on several New York City streets where race and class conflicts derail most efforts to transcend such barriers. Does this mean that people sometimes find ways—the will, actually—to work through their phobias and prejudices on these streets? Is it a matter of being willing to listen to one another with respect? Does it hinge on the sheer willpower of a subject, in this case myself, who was determined not to be reduced to a theoretical formulation or mere “data”? Given the vast inequalities, racial misunderstandings, and violence found on the street at every turn, I believe there was some measure of good luck involved here—the kind of luck that scholars and “subjects” of different races, classes, and genders will need when they encounter one another “in the field.”

*New York*  
*August 1999*