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From the Bronx to Cornell

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A young transplanted Kentuckian living in an impoverished pocket of Cincinnati among families of similar background once said to me, "I never knew I was urban-Appalachian till I read it in a magazine."

In my experience, people who reside within socio-economic shtetl-tags like "slum," "ghetto," "housing project," "inner-city" or even "blue collar" mainly don't think of themselves as living in that particular cubbyhole; they see themselves as living in the world, since most everybody they associate with also calls that corner of it home, and chronically cash-strapped people tend not to travel all that much.

In most cases people have to physically leave the village, turn around and look back to see where they came from before they can recognize not only its borders, both visible and invisible, but its very existence. For me, that started to come about in the fall of 1967, when I left Parkside Houses in the Bronx for college, or as someone's grandmother once called it, "sleep away school."

Upstate, in Ithaca, my world was instantaneously turned on its head when I found myself lugging a suitcase along a cinderblock dorm corridor flanked by rooms that were
populated by aliens from Boca Raton, Manhattan, Hong Kong, Short Hills, Guam, Marblehead, Barranquilla and Murfreesboro.

In the ensuing culture-shocked days and weeks, it wasn't, for me, so much that the world began dividing itself into the haves and the have-nots as it was that I began to understand that the world was, in fact, the WORLD. That is to say, it was not just a compound of two-dozen city-owned high-rises surrounded by asphalt-shingled or Formstone two-family houses. Class awareness, if you could call it that, seemed to fall more along the lines of aesthetics and experience than any bald expression of affluence. It seemed to me that everyone else's clothing was subdued and tossed together, not shiny, skintight and painstakingly color-coordinated. Rumpled, apparently, was a look, not a sin. Small, well-handling European cars were the ones to covet, not two-toned destroyer-length Cadillacs. Bob Dylan, despite his voice and appearance, was to be taken seriously, perhaps even more seriously than Frankie Valli. Smoking half a joint wasn't necessarily a one-way ticket to the booby-hatch, and a den, I was gently told, was not the same as a basement.

One of the stranger effects of my fascination and hyperawareness of our differences was to semiconsciously cultivate an exoticness about myself, probably as an ego-survival countermeasure against what I perceived as the genuine exoticness of everybody else. So I developed a heavy Bronx accent up in Ithaca that I had never had at home. (I wasn't the only one: there was a kid from Mississippi who, by mid-October, had begun twanging and drawling to put the Snopes to shame, even though his father was both a poet and the headmaster of a boarding school down there.)

And in a continuation of the reverse whammy, I also began spinning tales about my (truly pedestrian) upbringing, some apocryphal, some with just a little narrative topspin to tidy up the endings. I became very good at it: in fact, a little too good. Two new friends whom I had invited to my home over the Thanksgiving break both cancelled at the last minute. Later, back at school, they confessed to me that they had simply been too scared.

Three years after graduation, I was still at it, having published my first novel, "The Wanderers," a collection of linked stories about a gang of Bronx teenagers in the pre-Beatles 60's. Both an author and a grad student at
Columbia now, I affected an outer-borough inflection at readings and in interviews that had become thick enough to require subtitles. And so it went for years, until the night it all came to an abrupt, mortified halt. In the summer of 1977, after a lecture and a long Q & A in a Midtown Manhattan bookstore, I was approached by a middle-aged man with an accent much like my own.

"You went to Cornell, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"That's amazing," he said, me trying not to grin. "Because my daughter? She goes to Bronx Community College, and she speaks better freakin' English than you."

Richard Price is the author of seven novels, including "The Wanderers," "Clockers," and, most recently, "Samaritan."

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