

Note 1

Tepito, Mexico City, Wednesday June 7, 2017.

Baldy is a family friend on my mother's side who has worked as a *franelero*¹ for nearly ten years on a street corner at the far east end of Mexico City's best known street market. If anyone of my acquaintances was capable of finding someone to interview in-depth it was him, so I decided to contact him by text on the afternoon of June 2.

I was completely honest with him about my ethnographic aims, because I did not want to start our agreement on the wrong footing. Without any preamble I told him that I needed a native from the neighborhood who knew about drugs, whether they themselves were a user or because they were in some sense involved with distribution, to carry out an in-depth interview with

¹ A *franelero* is someone who looks after cars on the streets in those parts of Mexico City where there is a shortage of parking spaces. They also provide other services such as cleaning vehicles. Their name comes from the "franela," the cloth they use for their work. They are controversial figures because they "privatize" what are in reality public spaces, and they are an important feature of the culture of insecurity of Mexico's capital. Their services would be worthless if the vehicles and belongings inside were not in any sense under threat on the streets.

the use of a recorder during the meeting, and that everything was part of a College of Mexico project. His answer surprised me not only because it was positive, but because he got into the subject straight away: “And when do you want to start?” As soon as possible I told him. We agreed to a meeting at 6.30 p.m. on Wednesday June 7 on the street corner where he usually worked, so as not to interfere with his other activities.

I turned up to the meeting on time, although I had decided to arrive a little late, knowing that Baldy might not leave his work at the street market on time. The appearance of Tepito generally begins to change at around 5 p.m. when most commercial activities wind down. While I was walking down one of the main streets of the neighborhood in the direction of our meeting place I could see the traders packing their stalls away. Some handcarts were being used, blocking the way and I had to take care not to get run over by a scooter, carrying two or three local youths at full speed.

A few blocks before getting to the appointed place I came across one of those contrasting sights of Tepito: a Module of Citizen Security and Participation with police agents continually in view, directly in front of the “White house,” one of the best known sectors of the neighborhood, whose name had been linked to illegal activity on more than one occasion. In the middle and below a footbridge there were two agents on permanent guard with

their motorbike. As I moved onwards I sensed that I too was walking between these two extremes and I felt the force of this metaphor.

Baldy was waiting for me in the middle of the desolate street. He was pushing 50, dark-skinned and medium height at around 5 foot 6 inches, possibly around 200 pounds, with hair nearly shaven, hence his name, wearing simple clothing consisting of a cotton T shirt, jeans and work boots. We greeted each other as friends and he said that if it was not for the message I sent him in the morning of the same day, he would have forgotten about our meeting completely. I joked to him that I was lucky because I was worried, thinking quite honestly that I would be looking suspicious, all alone on a street corner in the neighborhood as it got dark.

He immediately began to walk. We crossed the avenue in the direction of the streets with names of trades, which have long been infamous as the center of insecurity in the neighborhood. He did not say anything about the potential informant, he gave no names, or description of what the person does, or where to find him. I just decided to follow him. We arrived at a very striking corner. The stores are laid out in a kind of delta shape with a nearly abandoned appearance, adorned with large graffitis, or rather cartoon-like images. There were three men there, two crouched down resting against a

metal shutter. One of these was around 30 years old, dressed like a rapper.² The other, around 40, had a shaved head and wore white framed glasses. The third man, the oldest of the three, was about 50 years old, and was dozing in the trunk of a Tsuru model taxi in the current city livery (white on pink boxes).

Baldy approached quickly. First he greeted the men who were crouching down with a hand slap and fist bump.

—What's up dudes?

—What's up? —they responded—. After that he walked towards the Tsuru and stirred the resting man with a light touch on the shoulder:

—I was looking for you bro. Come over here.

The man quickly sat up still half asleep. His name was Ivan, he was short at about 5 foot 3 inches, with dark copper colored skin from long exposure to the sun. His hair was combed back, in part gray, or rather silver. His eyes were small and dark and his nose short and slightly aquiline. His general appearance was thin although his stomach was slightly sticking out.

² Rap or hip-hop style clothing worn by Afro-American youths in the US, who relate to the singers of the same genre of music. It generally consists of baggy clothing: pants, sports shirts (basketball or American football), sweat shirts, well-known brands of basketball sneakers such as Adidas or Nike, wearing caps or scarves, as well as a few pieces of jewelry such as showy watches, rings and chains.

He was dressed in blue jeans, basketball sneakers and a white T shirt commemorating a pilgrimage.

Baldy took him by the neck with the right arm, as if he was putting him into a wrestling head lock, but the move was affectionate in a funny way. He brought his face up to the man's as if to whisper a secret and he said to him:

—My boy over here is doing a PhD and is looking for someone in the neighborhood who knows about drugs and who is willing to give an interview. And I straight away thought of you.

—Okay, okay —he replied frowning as he moved his head. I told him the work was anonymous, to which he said he could use an alias.

—But why? You're going to learn everything we talk about? —He asked.

I said I was carrying a recorder in my jacket which I would switch on and use for recording so that it would not interfere with the conversation. He thought it was a good idea and he said he had no problem with the use of the device. He told me he had a lot to say because he had lived for several years on the street, in a small row of stores to one side of the place where we were talking, and he added: “At one time I thought about writing a book about my life, of all my experiences, but it was a project I never got round to.”

Ivan agreed to participate, but he said that he could not start the project right then as he had something to do. He asked us to come to the same corner at 9 a.m. the next day, the time he started work. We said goodbye with the same style of greeting which Baldy had used with the men at the start of our encounter. We walked back and after walking just a few yards, Baldy told me that it did not seem convenient to him that we should arrive on time for our appointment, that it would be better for us to arrive half an hour later, at 9.30 p.m.