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The Media's Race Taboo

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EAST NEW YORK, Brooklyn -- It just might be that only the dead know Brooklyn. But here on the drug-ravaged streets of East New York, it is the walking dead who seem to rule the roost. On a blustery mid-March day, the scene is a hellish tableau of urban disintegration: skeletal streetwalkers, skulking addicts and tense teen-age crack dealers shooting mad-dog looks at rivals down the sidewalk.

Slightly built, with wire-rimmed glasses and a minister's demeanor, Eugene Richards is an unlikely figure against such a grim backdrop. Yet Mr. Richards has become intimate with the depravity of the drug world in East New York, one of several neighborhoods he photographed for "Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue," (Aperture), his recently published account of hard-core drug addiction in America's inner cities. Mr. Richards puts his considerable artistic talents in the service of social activism and has spent 20 years documenting the lives of the American underclass.

But instead of being celebrated for its boldness, the searing imagery of "Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue" has embroiled Mr. Richards in an ugly controversy, crimping the debate about drugs and poverty he thought the book might trigger and prompting him to bemoan the problem of political correctness in the media today.

If one picture is worth a thousand words, the controversy over Mr. Richards's picture book speaks volumes about the media's increasing difficulties in dealing with touchy social issues, particularly those with racial subtexts. Although Mr. Richards set out to probe the realities of

inner-city crack addiction and what he asserts is the racial and social injustice underlying them, the fact that he documented this as a disproportionately black and Hispanic problem has brought the racial censors down on him.

"Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue" is a collection of about 100 images gleaned from the four years Mr. Richards spent in three cracked-plagued neighborhoods: East New York and Red Hook in Brooklyn and North Philadelphia. Along with the photos comes a text, made up of equally gripping journal entries and taped transcriptions of interviews Mr. Richards conducted with addicts, their families and drug dealers. Together the words and the images evoke a Dante-esque world of psycho-violence, misogyny and abjection.

In December, seven pictures from the book were printed in the New York Times Magazine. Although the Times editors selected photos that showed whites, Hispanics and blacks with racial balance in mind, a furor erupted in the black community. The lightning rod was a shot of a black woman with a baby strapped to her back on her knees performing what looks like oral sex on a john in a crack house. On the wall behind them are pictures of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

Within a week, a group of prominent black clergymen and politicians signed a letter of protest to the Times. An editorial in the Amsterdam News, which serves New York's black community, declared that the pictures were "the most demeaning and degrading imagery we have ever seen in a reputable news organ anywhere in the world." A group called the Committee to Eliminate Media Offensive to African People, or Cemotap, mounted a demonstration outside the Times, and local black activist Al Sharpton threatened a boycott of the paper if Times executives did not meet with its members.

According to a Cemotap spokeswoman, Betty Dopson, Mr. Richards was a "degenerate, a loser and parasite who lives off the misery of unfortunate people, particularly blacks." Ms. Dopson also claimed that Mr. Richards had staged the image of the woman with the baby and the john in the crack house and offered a $1,000 reward for anyone with information to prove it. Ms. Dopson said: "If she had the consciousness to have the photos of black men like Malcolm and Martin on her walls she would never degrade herself and her child like that."

The pressure was unsuccessful at the Times. But it was effective in bullying the International Center of Photography, which postponed a

show of Mr. Richards's work after Cemotap demanded the show be canceled.

The furor cost Mr. Richards a juicy fee, too, for photos originally scheduled to run in Vibe magazine, the Time Warner hip-hop publication often referred to as "the Black Rolling Stone." Vibe had pursued Mr. Richards aggressively and had arranged a deal but canceled it shortly after the Times excerpt. According to Jonathan Van Meter, Vibe's editor in chief, Mr. Richards and his agent at Magnum left the impression with the magazine that it had an exclusive on the photos it had selected. Mr. Richards, however, says that the Vibe editors knew exactly what was in the works at the Times, and made the decision not to publish the photos because they didn't want any trouble.

The controversy took its most upsetting turn for Mr. Richards when the New York Times Book Review ran its review of "Cocaine True" on Feb. 5. Written by Times editorial writer Brent Staples (recently dubbed "the political corrector" by the New Republic), the review managed to praise Mr. Richards's oeuvre and disparage his most recent book at the same time.

Drugs were indeed a scourge in the African-American community, Mr. Staples admitted. Yet he still wanted to know "why are nearly all the people in these photographs black?" Asserting that "the vast majority of addicts in America are white" and that the white aspect of drug addiction is "consistently invisible in the media," Mr. Staples insisted he was "not asking for equal opportunity representation of drug abuse." But he did ask: "Couldn't Mr. Richards have found a setting where most or at least half the drug addicts are white?"

Mr. Staples also suggested that Mr. Richards had staged the "prostitute and john" photo. "Fortuitously or by plan," he wrote, "the scene is bracketed by pictures of Malcolm and Martin Luther King Jr. on the wall behind them." When asked if he had any evidence to support this serious charge, a breach of ethics that could cost a photographer on his own paper his job, Mr. Staples huffed: "You mean did I do any reporting, go out there and talk to people? No I did not."

Mr. Richards says he had initially worried that he might have been describing the problem of inner-city addiction out of context. But after researching the demographics, he says he realized he was "right on the button." "This is not a look at minority America," he says. "The

book's focus is people held by drugs, a disproportionate number of whom happen to be black or Hispanic."

Consider the "cold hard statistics," Mr. Richards wrote in a rebuttal to Mr. Staples, published in the New York Times Book Review of March 6. "Compared with the general population and with infrequent cocaine users, frequent cocaine users were more likely to be black or Hispanic and more likely to be living in large metro areas," Mr. Richards pointed out, citing a study published in the American Journal of Public Health. He also cited a study conducted by the National Institute of Drug Abuse, which said that while blacks and Hispanics are 21% of the U.S. population, they represent 46% of AIDS cases, a function of their disproportionate involvement in IV drug addiction.

Reflecting on his ordeal, Mr. Richards describes the lessons he has learned. During meetings with Cemotap representatives at the International Center of Photography, he says, he realized that the objections to his work had less to do with race than with class. Although he is well aware of the way images like his can be used to tar all minorities, he saw that the spokeswoman from Cemotap simply "wanted to dissociate herself from poor people." He's left to wonder whether the status anxieties of some middle- and professional-class blacks might be discouraging frank discussion of underclass problems.

Perhaps more upsetting is what the experience has taught him about his own profession and the regrettable climate of correctness that now permeates it. As we cruise out of East New York, Mr. Richards worries that issues that are racially or socially problematic "will get buried." This leaves him anxious about his role and that of the tradition of socially concerned photography he represents.

"There are certain subjects now that you just won't be able to deal with," he says. "It means that people will be very reluctant to touch any kind of sensitive racial story. It's all so depressing, how they let these skewering minor issues get in the way of seeing the real problem. An editor may say: `OK, go out and look at the drug war for us. But stay away from this and this and this.' It's probably the most terrible form of censorship." When it comes down to the question of political correctness, Mr. Richards admits, "I'm finding myself curiously aligned with the conservatives."

Mr. McGowan is a writer in New York.

(See related letter: "Letters to the Editor: Crack Degrades, Then Destroys Users" -- WSJ April 28, 1994)