

# Back Row America

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1. by Chris Arnade June 2019



I first walked into the Hunts Point neighborhood of the Bronx because I had been told not to. I had been told it was too dangerous and too poor, and that I was too white. I had been told that “nobody goes there for anything but drugs and prostitutes.” The people telling me this were my colleagues (other bankers), my neighbors (other wealthy Brooklynites), and my friends (other academics). All, like me, successful, well-educated people who had opinions on the Bronx but had never been there.

It was 2011, and I was in my eighteenth year as a Wall Street bond trader. I spent my work days sitting behind a wall of computers, gambling on flashing numbers, on a downtown Manhattan trading floor filled with hundreds of other people who did exactly the same thing. My home life was spent in a large Brooklyn apartment, in a neighborhood filled with other successful people.

I wasn't in the mood to listen to anyone, especially other bankers, other academics, and the educated experts who were my neighbors. I hadn't been for a few years. In 2008, the financial crisis had consumed the country and my life, sending Citibank, the company I worked for, into a tailspin stopped only by a government bailout. I had just seen where hubris—my own included—had taken us, and what it had cost the country. Not that it had actually cost us bankers, or my neighbors, much of anything.

I was in the habit of taking walks, sometimes as long as fifteen miles, to explore and reduce stress, but now my walks began to evolve. Rather than setting out with some plan to walk the entire length of Broadway, or along the length of a subway line, I started walking the

less-seen parts of New York City. Along the way, I talked to anyone who talked to me. I used my camera to take portraits of people I met.

What I started seeing and learning was just how cloistered and privileged my world was—and how narrow and selfish I was. Like most successful and well-educated people, especially in New York City, I considered myself open-minded, considerate, and reflective about my privilege. I read three papers daily, I watched documentaries on our social problems, and I voted for and supported policies that I felt recognized and addressed my privilege. I gave money and time to charities that focused on poverty and injustice. I understood that I was - selfish, but I rationalized. Aren't we all selfish? Besides, I am far less selfish than others. Look at how I vote (progressive), what I believe in (equality), and who my colleagues are (people of all races from all places).

When I first came to Hunts Point, I was determined to be respectful. I knew that HBO had done an early and salacious documentary called *Hookers at the Point*. Other documentaries had likewise focused on the drugs and the sex work, not on the lived realities of the majority of the residents. So I spent most of my time talking to and photographing the bike clubs, the pigeon keepers, the graffiti artists, and the workers from the nonprofits. My focus changed during a rare, quiet moment in the industrial part of Hunts Point on a Sunday afternoon. The truck traffic was light and most of the shops were closed. Takeesha was standing alone by a trickling fire hydrant, washing her face. She was working, wearing thigh-high faux-leather red boots and leopard-print tights, waving at every car or truck that passed by. She yelled to me, "Hey, take my picture!" When I asked why, she said, "Because I am a sexy, beautiful prostitute."

Over the next half hour, she told me her life story. She told me how her mother's pimp had put her on the streets at twelve. How she had had her first child at thirteen. How she was addicted to heroin. I ended by asking her the question I asked everyone I photographed: How do you want to be described? She replied without a pause, "As who I am. A prostitute, a mother of six, and a child of God."

I spent the next three years following Takeesha and the street family she was a member of—roughly fifty men and women who lived under bridges, in abandoned buildings, in sheds, in pits, in broken-down trucks, on rooftops, or, if they scored enough money, in per-hour motels. What she showed me prompted me to travel to other neighborhoods in cities across America, from Buffalo to New Haven to Cleveland to Selma to El Paso to Amarillo. In each of these places, people have a sense of being left behind and forgotten—or, worse, mocked and stigmatized by the rest of the world as it moves on and up with the GDP.

In many cases, these neighborhoods have literally been left behind by people like me. I spent most of my life focused on getting ahead by education. I left my rural hometown and got into elite schools, which got me into elite jobs, which got me into an elite neighborhood.

I was not unusual. My office, my neighborhood, and most of my adult friends were like me. Almost all of us had used education to get out of a hometown that we saw as oppressive, intolerant, and judgmental.

We were the kids who sat in the front row, eager to learn and make sure the teacher knew we were learning. We were mobile, having moved many times to advance in our careers, and we would move again. Staying put was a form of failure. Our community was global, allowing us to proclaim it to be diverse, despite every resident's having followed a similar path after high school.

Our isolation from the bulk of the country left us with a narrow view of the world. We valued what we could measure, and that meant material wealth. Things that couldn't be measured—community, dignity, faith, happiness—were largely ignored because they were hard to see, especially from so far away.

We had compassion for those who got left behind, but thought that our job was to provide them an opportunity (no matter how small) to get where we were. It didn't occur to us that what we valued wasn't what everyone else wanted. They were the people who couldn't or didn't want to leave their town or their family to get an education at an elite college, the people who cared more about their faith than about science. If we were the front row, they were the back row.

Had I asked people in my hometown why they were still there, I would have received the answer I heard in neighborhoods from Cairo to Amarillo to rural Ohio. They would have looked at me like I was crazy and said, "Because it is my home."

When communities and towns are destroyed, partly because of the front row's policies of globalization, the front row solution is, "Well, just move." What matters is growth at all costs—even if it is brutal—and that requires everyone, always, to be economic migrants. The front row likes to say that the U.S. is a country of migrants, where people have always moved for jobs. It has been done before—the Dust Bowl, the northern migration of African Americans. But those migrations were responses to failure, not signs of success.

A few weeks before the election of Donald Trump, I returned home, to a neighborhood I hadn't visited in thirty years. I had spent almost two years traveling around the country, and it had been almost five years since I had first walked into the South Bronx. I had intended to come back earlier—if I was going to try to understand all of our country, I had to understand my hometown.

As I passed one of the older remaining wooden homes, a man sitting on his porch asked if he could help me. It was his polite way of saying, "What the hell is a white guy I've never seen before doing walking around here with a camera?" I didn't have a good answer at that moment, so I offered up the first name I could remember from the neighborhood, an old

friend I had spent summers working with. I said, "I'm looking for Stephon C. I'm an old friend and want to say hello to him." I hadn't seen or heard from Stephon since the last summer we worked together more than thirty years ago. I hadn't ever searched for his name on Facebook, seen any news about him, or asked about him. I had no other reason to talk to Stephon beyond curiosity.

The old man didn't miss a beat, just said, "Oh, Stephon's people are over on Goldenrod, about four blocks that way. You can't miss his house, at the back end of the circle with a blue Olds in the driveway. Say hi for me."

When I found the house his people stayed at, a young mother came out. When I asked if Stephon was around, she dialed her phone and handed it to me before I had a chance to say who I was.

“Hello, who is this?”

“Hey, Stephon, this is Chris Arnade. We used to work together back at St. Leo Paint Crew for Bob. Way back in the early eighties.”

“Who?”

“Chris. The tall, skinny white guy. We both almost got our ankles broke by the forklift when we were stoned?”

“Chris?”

“Peabody. You called me Peabody.”

“Oh yeah. Peabody. Damn, man. Long time. What can I do for you?”

“I just was in town and wanted to say hi and see how you’re doing. I was over your way, near your place in Dade City. You OK?”

“I am OK, over in Z-hills right now, staying here for a bit, juggling some things. [Yelling in the background.] Hey, I was running out. Can I call you back? Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Sure. Just wanted to say hi.”

I handed the phone back, sinking into a funk. I had returned to my hometown because if I was going to document the back row, then I needed to look at my own town. Yet it was more than five years after I started my project before I had gotten around to it. I realized I had stayed away despite an affection for my old neighbors, childhood friends, and others in the community, because I didn’t feel I belonged.

During my first few years of college, I came back for summers to live in my old room and work at my old job on the paint and custodial crew at the local Catholic college. It was a crew of about thirty people, and I was the outsider. I was the white kid saving money to pay

for my escape, while everyone else was older and black. More important, I had a future that didn't include this job, this town, or this place. The others on the crew were working to feed themselves, to feed their kids, to pay for the basics of life.

That is where I met Stephon. We bonded over smoking weed, drinking, and making fun of the Bible-thumpers in the crew. Mostly that meant teasing Preacher Man, who was a minister and a custodian. He was the leader of a group of people who used their free time to pray. During our short breaks or when work got slow, he put on his tiny round glasses and read from the Bible to other workers who were sitting on bare mattresses, crammed into half-painted dorm rooms, or sitting on upturned buckets around a custodial closet.

Every day, Preacher Man tried to get me to join. I always declined, preferring to spend our breaks smoking or doing whatever. Preacher Man sometimes got frustrated and questioned me. He saw me as a smart kid, and thought that with the right training I could become a good preacher like himself. He couldn't understand why, if I read so many books, I wouldn't take the time to read the Bible. I always told him the Bible wasn't for me. He shot back, "What do you believe in?" I smiled and told him I was busy, or that I preferred my science or history books. He kept pressing me until one day I finally broke.

That day we were sitting around during our lunch break, just shooting the shit. Preacher Man was trying to convert those of us who didn't join his prayer group. He singled me out, pestering and pestering me. After five minutes of ignoring him, I said, "I am an atheist. I don't believe in a God. I don't think the world is only five thousand years old. I don't think Cain and Abel married their sisters!"

He said, "You don't believe in God? You don't believe in the Bible? Did I understand you correctly?"

I said, "Yes. Yes. Yes. I don't believe in God or the Bible."

Preacher Man's eyes narrowed, and he pointed at me. "You are an APE-IEST. An APE-IEST. You going to lead a life of sin and end in hell."

By then, I was done with my town, done with the closed-mindedness, and I wanted out. Although I didn't hate on Preacher Man, didn't spend much time arguing with him, didn't try to put him in his place, I did feel sorry for him. Living such a shallow, closed-minded life, I thought. Simple man wasting his life away with gobbledygook and hocus-pocus. I viewed him as intolerant. In fact, his intolerance simply didn't fit my intolerance. My intolerance was credential-based.

When I look back now at Preacher Man and the others praying, I see people striving for dignity in a harsh world. I see mothers working minimum-wage jobs, trying to raise three children alone. I see a teenager fingering a small cross and a young woman abused by an

addict father. I see Preacher Man living across the tracks in a beat-up shotgun shack, desperate to stay clean, desperate to make sense of a world that has given him little. Their faith may not be true, I tell myself, but it is useful.

During my years on Wall Street, I argued for policies based on data. I thought we should focus on things that could be quantified—like higher profits and greater economic growth. I measured success by how high the stock market was or whether we had maximized profits and minimized expenses, not by whether we had done the right thing.

I was not alone. Most of us in the front row had decided that it was impossible to identify absolutes, that moral certainties were suspect, and that all that we could know or value was what science revealed to be quantifiable. Religion was an old, irrational thing that limited and repressed people—and often outright oppressed them.

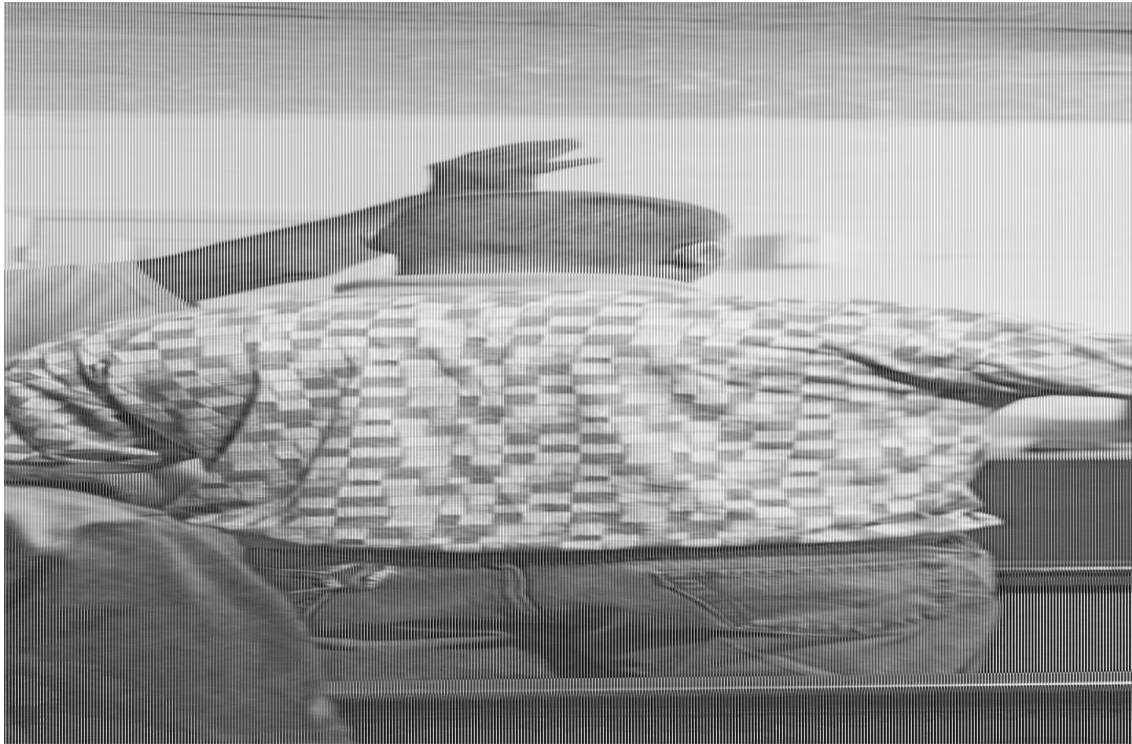
Yet from the moment I first walked into Hunts Point, I kept finding myself in churches, as I kept finding myself in McDonald's, going there for one reason: because the people I wanted to learn from spent their time there. Often the only places open, welcoming, and busy in back row neighborhoods were churches or McDonald's. Often the people using the McDonald's were the same people using the churches, people who sat for hours reading or studying the Bible at a booth.

When I first went to the Bronx, I expected that the people there, those most affected by the coldness and ruthlessness of the world, would share my atheism. Instead, I found a strong belief in the supernatural, and a faith that manifested in many ways, mostly as a belief in the Bible.

Everyone I met there who was living homeless or battling an addiction held a deep faith. Street walking is stunningly dangerous work, and everyone has stories of being cut, attacked, and threatened, or stories of others who were killed. Everyone has to deal with the danger. Few work without a mix of heroin, Xanax, or crack. None without faith. "You know what kept me through all that? God. Whenever I got into the car, God got into the car with me."

There are dirty Bibles in crack houses, Qur'ans in abandoned buildings. There is a picture of the Last Supper that moves with a couple living on the streets. Rosaries, crucifixes, and religious icons are worn for protection and good luck. Pages of the Bible are torn out, folded up, and kept in pockets, to be pulled out and fingered nervously, or read over in times of stress, or held during prayers.

When someone goes missing and rumors fill the void, ad hoc ceremonies are held. Small shrines are made from old needles and votive candles lifted from the dollar store, with water from a leaking hydrant sprinkled around. The person almost always comes back, either from jail, rehab, or hiding away, his death just a rumor.



Mixed with faith in God is a strong belief in the reality of evil. Crossing the bridge into Hunts Point, Takeesha looks out the window of my van. “This place is so bad and evil. It’s, like, so simple to walk across the bridge, but it’s like you can’t go across, you understand? This place is evil. It’s possessed. It’s evil. I been here a long time. There are bad spirits here. I have seen good people, I have seen people that have family, jobs, and they come here and they get dug in, and two weeks later they living in a cardboard box.”

Her friend Steve listens and agrees, saying, “This place is haunted. It pulls you in and chews you up. I was, like, five years in jail, and when I was released, I came back here, and the first day I was doing crack. One day back. Crack. It’s a f\*cked-up place. Keep coming back to it. Hunts Point is for devils.”

When you’re up against evil, whether the mysterious efforts of demons or the all-too-explainable effects of drugs, the world of science, education, and smart arguments doesn’t do much for you.

All that the front row offers to those living shattered lives in broken buildings is sterile institutions that chew them up and then spit them out. In the view of many on the streets, the Bronx Criminal Court, the NYPD’s 41st Precinct, Rikers, the welfare office, Lincoln Hospital, rehab clinics and detox centers, law offices, and the nonprofits have no soul. They are dreary places with harsh fluorescent lighting, checkered linoleum floors, and platitudes hung next to rules: “Hope offered here” next to a “PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH THE TV” sign. These are institutions that back row Americans have to navigate like mice working their way through a maze. Each hour waiting in the hospital, the courthouse, or the intake center is an hour that numbs them. An hour of forms to be filled out and absurd rules to be followed.



Sometimes the members of the back row really are mice in a maze. Sometimes scientists put them in labs, give them crack, and attach them to monitors, poking and prodding. They did that to Takeesha once. "One time I did this crack study for \$2,500. It was psychological. I saw the advertisement on the train and went to this building at the university. They gave me pristine Colombian, small but potent crack. Never had any shit that good in my life. They did me up and down in the head for days. Hell no they ain't doing that to me again in their hospital."

For many back row Americans, the only places that regularly treat them like humans are churches. The churches are everywhere, small churches that have come in and taken over a space and light it up on Sundays and Wednesdays. They walk inside the church, and immediately they meet people who get them. The preachers and congregants inside may preach to them, even judge their past decisions, but they don't look down on them. They have walked the walk and know the shit they are going through, not from a book, not from a movie, not from an article, not from a study, but from their own lives or the lives of their friends. They look like them, and they get them.

There are rules to follow if you join, but they don't require having your paperwork in order or having proper ID. They don't require getting grilled about this and that. They say, "Enter as you are," letting forgiveness wash away a past that many want gone. You are welcome as long as you try. The churches understand the streets, understand everyone is a sinner and everyone fails. The rest of the world—the courts, the hospitals, the rehab clinics, the welfare office, police stations, and even some of the nonprofits and schools (especially the universities that won't even let you on campus without the police being called)—doesn't understand that. That cold, secular world of the well-intentioned is a distant and judgmental thing.

The churches are also the way out of addiction, a way to end the cycle. The few success stories told on the streets are of relatives, friends, or spouses who found God, got with the discipline and order of a church, and moved away: "Princess met a decent man who was dedicated to the Scripture. She got straight, got God, and last we heard was on a farm upstate." "Neccee went to her grandmother's and found God, and she now has her one-year chip."

When I walked into the Bronx I was an atheist. It was something I was sure about. After years of traveling America, I wasn't so sure. To my educated lifelong friends, I might have said I was agnostic, or still an atheist, but one who appreciated religion.



To the believers I met I would say, “I appreciate the power of faith,” or “I understand the power of the Bible.” To the more direct and blunt questions, “Yes I read the Bible now and then, but I wouldn’t call myself religious,” or, “I have not been saved, but I do read the Bible.”

None of it was a lie, but the more direct truth was that even after I had come to see how useful religion was, I still attended services as an outsider trying to understand why faith drew so many people to it. Why it seemed to comfort those who needed it the most. In the language of the church, I wasn’t yet saved. In the language of my friends, I was a scientist trying to understand religion.

I could no longer ignore the value of faith, not as a scientist, not as a person who claimed to want to learn from others. Yet I still saw it as a utility—something popular because it worked. Still, after attending hundreds of different services I was beginning to realize there was more to it than that. My biases were limiting a deeper understanding: that perhaps religion was right, or at least as right as anything could be. Getting there required a level of intellectual humility that I was not sure I had.

Like most in the front row, I am used to thinking we have all the answers. On Wall Street, there were few problems we couldn't solve with enough smarts, energy, audacity, or money. We even managed to push death into the distance; with enough research and enough resources—eating right, doing the right things, going to the correct medical specialist—the inevitable could be delayed, and mortality could feel distant.

With a great job and a great apartment in a great neighborhood, it is easy to feel we have nothing for which we need to be absolved. The fundamental fallibility of humans seems outdated, distant. It's not hard to imagine that you have everything under control.

On the streets, few can delude themselves into thinking they have it under control. You cannot ignore death there, and you cannot ignore human fallibility. It is easier to see that everyone is a sinner, everyone is fallible, and everyone is mortal. It is easier to see that there are things just too deep, too important, or too great for us to know. It is far easier to recognize that one must come to peace with the idea that we don't and never will have this under control. It is far easier to see religion not just as useful, but as true.

*Chris Arnade is a freelance writer and photographer. This piece is excerpted from Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America by Chris Arnade, to be published on June 4 by Sentinel, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC. Text and photographs © 2019 by Chris Arnade.*

