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Alice Neel (1900-1984), *Dominican Boys on 108th Street* (1955). See page 801.

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Alice Neel (1900-1984)

Dominican Boys on 108th Street (1955)

SINCE THE LATE 1800s, THE AREA FROM MANHATTAN'S 5th Avenue to the East River between about 96th and 130th streets has been a multicultural mixing chamber of new immigrants and African Americans. The last big immigrant wave came from Puerto Rico and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands. They called the area *El Barrio*; to others, it became Spanish Harlem. By any name, it has long been a poor neighborhood just a subway ride away from some of the most expensive real estate in the world.

Sociologist Patricia Cayo Sexton wrote, "The most striking contrast between the rich and the poor areas of Manhattan is in the visible wealth of the one and the visible children of the other."^{1(p3)} Many of Spanish Harlem's children had immigrated along with their parents; others were born there to mothers raised in a culture where girls grew up rapidly, married early, and promptly had babies. Once in New York, parents often worked long hours in the garment district or in service jobs elsewhere in the city, which sapped the energy and time they had for raising children. So children in Spanish Harlem learned to become self-reliant at an early age.

The 2 boys on this month's cover were most likely portrayed in their native habitat. Boys especially spent a lot of time in the streets. Living quarters were crowded, and there were not many parks and playgrounds nearby. By day, there were sidewalk and street games, neighbors sitting and talking on the steps, music, shops, and shop-pers to offer stimulation. By night, the streets beckoned in more sinister ways as a realm of gangs, crime, and drugs. The 2 youths shown here, still small enough to be boys, look street smart and already well along toward becoming young men.

When artist Alice Neel painted this picture in 1955, she was a single mother herself raising 2 teenage sons in Spanish Harlem. She had long since left behind her small-

town Pennsylvania upbringing. Her older boy's father was a Puerto Rican guitarist whom she had met while leading a bohemian life in Greenwich Village. He had family in Spanish Harlem, and the rent was cheap when they moved there in 1938. But soon he was gone. Two years later, she was pregnant again by a Russian immigrant filmmaker who came and went. Through years of hardship, Neel managed to keep painting steadily, often pictures of her neighbors and the children of Spanish Harlem. Some of what would later become her best-known work accumulated on the shelves of her studio apartment, where she taught art classes to get by.

Education is said to be a ladder out of poverty. Somehow Alice Neel managed to get both of her sons into private schools on scholarships and then sent them to boarding school and Columbia. Her son Richard went on to law school and became a New York attorney. Her son Hartley went to medical school and is now a radiologist in Vermont. When Neel was in her 60s, her art began at last to be recognized, appreciated, and bought. As for many of her neighbors, the streets of Spanish Harlem led away to a more comfortable life elsewhere. She moved to a quieter apartment on the other side of Manhattan, where she continued to paint pictures of people—by then, many famous ones in addition to her own grandchildren—until her death at age 84.

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REFERENCE

1. Sexton PC. *Spanish Harlem*. New York, NY: Harper Colophon; 1965.