

"GOIN' LEGIT": DISRESPECT AND RESISTANCE AT WORK

I really wanna work legal.

Primo

Everyone in Ray's network — including Ray himself — has had extensive experience working honestly. Most entered the legal labor market at exceptionally young ages. By the time they were twelve, they were bagging and delivering groceries at the supermarket for tips, stocking beer off the books in local bodegas, or running errands. Before reaching twenty-one years of age, however, virtually none had fulfilled their early childhood dreams of finding stable, well-paid legal work.

The problem is structural, as outlined briefly in Chapter 2: From the 1950s through the 1980s second-generation inner-city Puerto Ricans were trapped in the most vulnerable niche of a factory-based economy that was rapidly being replaced by service industries. Between 1950 and 1990, the proportion of factory jobs in New York City decreased approximately threefold at the same time that service sector jobs doubled. The Department of City Planning calculates that over 800,000 industrial jobs were lost from the 1960s through the early 1990s, while the total number of jobs of all categories remained more or less constant at 3.5 million.¹

Economists and sociologists have documented statistically that the restructuring of the U.S. economy around service jobs has resulted in unemployment, income reduction, weaker unions, and dramatic erosions in worker's benefits at the entry level. Few scholars, however, have noted the cultural dislocations of the new service economy. These cultural

clashes have been most pronounced in the office-work service jobs that have multiplied because of the dramatic expansion of the finance, real estate, and insurance (FIRE) sector in New York City. Service work in professional offices is the most dynamic place for ambitious inner-city youths to find entry-level jobs if they aspire to upward mobility. Employment as mail room clerks, photocopiers, and messengers in the high-rise office corridors of the financial district propels many inner-city youths into a wrenching cultural confrontation with the upper-middle-class white world. Obedience to the norms of high-rise, office-corridor culture is in direct contradiction to street culture's definitions of personal dignity — especially for males who are socialized not to accept public subordination.

Resistance, Laziness, and Self-Destruction

Contrary to my expectations, most of the dealers had not completely withdrawn from the legal economy. On the contrary — as I have shown in Chapter 3, in discussing the jobs that Willie and Benzie left to become crack dealers and addicts — they are precariously perched on the edge of the legal economy. Their poverty remains their only constant as they alternate between street-level crack dealing and just-above-minimum-wage legal employment. The working-class jobs they manage to find are objectively recognized to be among the least desirable in U.S. society; hence the following list of just a few of the jobs held by some of the Game Room regulars during the years I knew them: unlicensed asbestos remover, home attendant, street-corner flyer distributor, deep-fat fry cook, and night-shift security guard on the violent ward at the municipal hospital for the criminally insane.

They were usually fired from these jobs, but they treated their return to the world of street dealing as a triumph of free will and resistance on their part. A straightforward refusal to be exploited in the legal labor market pushes them into the crack economy and into substance abuse. At the same time, however, becoming a crack seller is by no means the voluntarily triumphalist decision that many street dealers claim it to be. Primo repeatedly confided to me his frustration over not being able to find steady legal employment. He initially admitted this to me when his probation officer ordered him to go to an employment agency following

In Search of Respect

his first felony conviction for selling crack. Beneath his outrage over the bad working conditions he was offered, lay a deep fear that his biggest problem is incompetence and laziness.

Primo: [while crushing cocaine in a dollar bill in the back of the Game Room] That fuckin' lady counselor I got; she's a stupid bitch. She wanted me to be like a security guard, you know. I don't wanta be no guard. I don't wanta deal with some crazy son of a bitch outside. I let them rob anything. Word! All I got is a stick in my hand. And I'm only getting paid once a week. I let them rob anything, man.

That fucking counselor she tells me [imitating a bureaucratic whine], "The better your qualifications, the better the work." Well fuck her, I'll just keep searching on my own.

I had an appointment yesterday, a company that I was supposed to check out that takes care of like sheets and stuff, like from hotels — rooming service. So I went to see, just to take a look at it; but there's a lot of Mexicans in there, and I'm not a fucking Mexican.

My cousin's got a job where he's been working for like three years. He told me last week, "Come with me tomorrow morning to talk to the boss." But it didn't work out. I overslept. I had even set up the clock, but I didn't hear the alarm [sniffing cocaine].

Philippe: Why don't you just take any old bullshit job just for right now? Like what your sister's got at McDonald's.

Primo: You know why I don't fly to work real quick? I am twenty-six years old, and if I was to fly out of my way and get a McDonald's job and not no union job, it just shows that you're flying to get a McDonald's to cover your ass.

Twenty-six-year-old guy at McDonald's! Every time you go to McDonald's, you don't see anybody twenty-six years old.

Every time that you see someone that's older, it's probably because they don't have no education; no high school; no nothing. They don't speak English. I mean my English is very bad, but I can go further than at Burger King.

Philippe: Man! You're just making up excuses.

Caesar: [interrupting, almost angry at me] You know what I call

At Work: Disrespect and Resistance

working at a Burger King or a McDonald's? That's what I call slavery-ing.

I know, because I worked there, and working at McDonald's is overworked and underpaid. You could work full time — a week, five days a week — full time, and you only come home with like a hundred forty, one thirty.

And you know why it's fucked up? It's not only because it's overworked and underpaid; it's that you have to — I mean when I talk about overworked and underpaid! — you have to fuckin' fry burgers; scrub the floors; because you have to do so much work for bullshit money

[suddenly reaching for the dollar bill with cocaine and changing his serious tone to a smirk] The only reason why I don't get a decent job is because I'm lazy. I don't want to go through the processes.

I don't want to go looking for no bullshit job and be all frustrated and be getting paid weak and shit like that, until something else comes along.

'Cause think about it; if you got a bullshit job; how you gonna go look for another one? 'Cause you gonna be there at the job all the time. And why you wanna be missing a day of your work to go see an interview so they could tell you, "We'll call you."

[motioning to Primo to dip his key in the pile of cocaine] Yo! Feed me Primo!

And then you lose a day's pay which makes you move more to the brink of hell 'cause then you don't got money for drugs. [grinning wildly before sniffing from the key tip full of cocaine that Primo was holding up to his left nostril] And if I can't get high the way I want to be on the weekends . . . [sniffing again, loud mutual laughter]

Philippe: Okay! Okay! C-Zone, I hear you. But seriously Primo, you got a court case coming up.

Primo: [sniffing and recomposing himself] Yes, I am making excuses, but I'll go to the job center on Monday and follow up. I think I had just got used to the street scene, because it's been a while since I've held a legal job that's been there.

I didn't like the tuxedo place they sent me to last week. I didn't

In Search of Respect

want to be measuring men. It's not for me to be touching men all over the place like that. That's wack!

At the same time I shoulda stayed for more than two weeks. That was just not the whole excuse. My problem was that I was hanging out late at the Game Room and I've got to wake up in the morning to get to work.

Caesar: [reassuringly] Naah. I visited the store, it wasn't no place to make a career.

Primo: [morosely] I was just fucking up. I made a choice from there to here and I'm still here.

Caesar: Yeah, I'm lazy right now, 'cause I just want to get up at any fucking chosen time of the day. Wash my balls and go outside with a fat belly from all the grub in my house and go hang out and write [rap] rhymes and bug out upstairs and make my little bullshit money.

See, I stay out of trouble in a way by selling crack, 'cause I chill with Primo. [motioning to Primo to serve him more cocaine] See, what fucked me up before when I was working legal was, I was using the crack. That was the only thing that fucked me up.

'Cause really, I'm happy with my life. [sniffing] Like no one is bothering me. I got my respect back.

Buela [grandma] likes me. I got a woman. I got a kid. I feel complete now. I don't really need nothing. I got money to get wrecked. [sniffing again] I just go downstairs and work for Pops, and I ain't taking none of it home because tomorrow I don't need no money. So I'll go get wrecked, but then tomorrow I don't need no money, 'cause I go back to the Game Room: I work; I get the money; and then I can go get wrecked again. [pointing to Primo, who was dipping his key back into the cocaine]

Philippe: [laughing] That's why your sneakers are so dirty?

Caesar: Only reason I ain't got nice new sneakers is 'cause I have a decision: I could either save the money to buy the sneakers, or I could get wrecked. And right now, I'm going to get wrecked. [sniffing again]

The money I make in the Game Room is for my personal madness; for my personal drug-addiction and self-destruction. It's something only I could control. No one could tell me what to do with it.

At Work: Disrespect and Resistance

[breaking into a tirade] So I could hurt myself on the inside; so I could wake up every morning with my stomach twisted all in knots and throwing up and sick; and I can't eat; and I can't breathe and I'm fulla' diarrhea; and I'm shitting all over the place; and I'm fucked up; and my one eye is pink; and one eye is white; and my hair stinks; and I'm dirty; and I don't bathe; and I'm fucked up; and I stink; and I hate my woman; and I hate everybody in the morning. That's what happens to me after I get wrecked. [sniffing again]

But then I'll chill; and I'll be sick; and I'll puke; and then I'll be cool by the time I get to the Game Room. Then we're having a good time; we're breaking shit [pointing to where the television used to be, then opening the door of the Game Room for a customer who had knocked]. We're hassling customers; we're cursing customers. Cursing customers in Spanish in front of them; fucking with their minds; selling them garbage drugs so we can make our money [collecting ten dollars and handing over two crack vials]; and so we can go out and buy garbage drugs [pointing to the folded dollar bill full of cocaine balanced on Primo's knee]; and get tipped ourselves; and talk immense amount of shit [pointing to my tape recorder].

Philippe: What about all the money you could be making steadily if you was legal?

Caesar: My woman takes care of me with her food, 'cause she got, she got welfare and food stamps. In a few months I start getting my social security again - three hundred dollars every month, and that's enough for all my gear.

My problem started because they found out that I had worked legal and they had to tax me a thousand five hundred dollars. So they been jerking me now for a couple of months until my SSI pays it all back.

First Fired - Last Hired

None of those in Ray's network considered themselves to be victims. Their niche in the underground economy shielded them from having to face the fact that they were socially and economically superfluous to mainstream society. I watched Primo struggle with the glimmering

realization of his profound economic vulnerability when one of his episodic attempts to reenter the legal economy coincided with the deepening of the recession that afflicted the U.S. economy from late 1989 through 1991. At first Primo was totally confident. "I've had like ten jobs before in my life. I dropped out of school at sixteen and I've been working ever since. Any asshole can find a job out there." He almost enjoyed taking the subway downtown during daylight hours, marveling at the "full cheeks" and "cut hair" of the healthy-looking legally employed commuters.

When a half-dozen employers abruptly refused to hire him, Primo was able to blame his inability to find a job on his employment counselor, even though the newspapers were running euphemistically worded articles about the "temporary interruption in America's growth" and "the softening in the labor market."² He defiantly "fired" his counselor:

Primo: I got a feeling this son of a bitch guy at the job center, my job counselor, was high. His eyes were always red. He lost my whole files. He was helping me without even knowing who the fuck I was. He sent me to so many fucking places, and nothing.

That nigga' must have been on drugs. He was looking for my file all over his office. He's an idiot because that file was thick. It had all of the rest's I took.

I told him, "Maybe you're not supposed to be my supervisor. Why don't you look around to some other counselor?"

He said, "No, I had your file. I don't know where it's at."

He had a whole bunch of files, and I was hoping he would like look through the files and find mine, but mine wasn't there at all. It was like I never existed.

A month later, after another half-dozen employment rejections, Primo's self-confidence plummeted and his substance abuse escalated. He was living in flesh and blood the sense of personal powerlessness that impersonal market forces of supply and demand impose on vulnerable laborers during recessions:

Primo: It's become hard to get a job now, I guess. It used to be easy to get a job, or maybe this TAP [Testing Assessment and Placement] Center I'm going to is sending me to the wrong places.

I keep telling my job counselor, "Why don't you send me to a place you haven't sent someone the day before, so that when they see me, it's definitely that they'll take me? Because when you send them a few people, then they're just not going to take me."

But I think my counselor agreed with the bosses to send them a few people, and "whoever you like better you can keep." Which is bad!

I told him, "Why don't you just tell them, just say, 'We can only send you one person because we lack more people. We lack clients.'"

Instead this guy was sending me and everyone else. That makes your chances fucked up. Its like you got to battle it out to get a job.

In the old days the TAP centers were better. Everytime they sent me to some company, boom! I'm hired, because they're not sending a whole bunch of people. Word!

The dramatic deterioration in 1990 of the number of jobs available in the entry-level legal labor market caught Primo by surprise. Not only did the recession make it hard to find a job, but Primo also had to confront his life-cycle developmental constraints: He was rapidly becoming too old to compete for the kinds of jobs that had been available to him when he had been an eager, teenage high school dropout just entering the legal labor force. Now that Primo was in his mid-twenties he had a several-year-long hiatus of unemployment that he was unable to justify to prospective employers. Primo internalized his structural marginalization. He panicked and spiraled into a psychological depression.

Primo: I guess I was wrong, Felipe, about how easy it is to get a job.

I was hearing on the news that there's a depression . . . an economic recession — or something like that. And I was thinking to myself, "Damn! That's going to fuck up not only city, state, or federal workers, but it also fucks up someone like me. . . I guess — people that don't have skills, like me. This is fucked up."

It makes me feel fucked up, not being able to get a job. Because sometimes it seems like I like to be lazy.

But you get tired of sitting around and not doing shit. I like to

In Search of Respect

make myself useful, really — like I'm worth something. Not having a job makes me feel really fucked up, man.

Perhaps realizing that jobs are often found through personal connections, Primo began inviting his only legally employed ex-Game Room associate, Benzie, to hang out with him more often. Sure enough, Benzie began telling Primo about a possible opening in the kitchen of the downtown health club where he worked. The night before Christmas Eve he even motivated Primo to come to the office Christmas party to meet his supervisor. Primo arrived late, however, long after the upper-echelon administrators had left. He managed to meet only a few of the custodial workers, who were finishing off the leftover punch. Later that night, in his mother's housing project stairwell surrounded by beer, cocaine, and heroin, Benzie berated Primo for having ruined his chances of getting a job. During the conversation, however, Primo discovered the limitations of the job he had been so eagerly pursuing, and also whom he was competing with:

Benzie: You remember El Gordo — that fat guy — at the party? Well, he's the one that I'm trying to get my supervisor to fire so that you can get the job.

Primo: But all he be doing is washing dishes.

Benzie: [a little flustered] I know. . . I'm in the back with him. I'm in charge of him. He's always fucking up. I keep trying to get him on point, but he doesn't take the job seriously.

I keep telling my supervisor I know someone who really wants to work. But she's not hard on him. She feels sorry for him. And I feel sorry for him too, 'cause I know how he is.

Primo: [suspiciously] What do you mean "how he is"?

Benzie: [ignoring the question] So Pops, your responsibility would be to wash dishes; but it's at six dollars an hour; and there's no place you could go to wash dishes that they'll start you off at six dollars an hour. They'll start you off at four or five.

And after you work for a year you get a week vacation . . .

Primo: [interrupting] Answer me! What's with El Gordo? Why everyone feel sorry for him?

Benzie: [embarrassed] I mean he's slow, so he takes the job in a funny way.

At Work: Disrespect and Resistance

Primo: [worried] What do you mean he's slow?

Benzie: I mean he's slow in the mind. He's got like a handicap. [defensively] Listen man, I'm only trying to help you out.

Benzie's mentally retarded colleague outcompeted Primo for the dish-washing job. Meanwhile, the logistics of Primo's personal life began falling apart. He had been squatting with his girlfriend, Maria, in her sister's project apartment opposite the Game Room. Maria's sister had fled to Connecticut with her husband and three children when her husband's drug-selling partner was found shot to death in their car. Primo and Maria were supposed to take charge of the continuing rent payments, but this was the same period when Ray had limited Primo to working two nights a week at the Game Room, and sales were slow. Maria found a job at a fast-food franchise, but this still did not provide them with enough money to meet their bare necessities. Primo was reduced to begging from his mother and sisters.

Primo: Maria just started this week at Wendy's but she makes — net pay — about eighty something, ninety something bucks a week. Her welfare is a fucking piece of shit. She gets like not even forty dollars every other week. It's thirty-seven and some change because the cashiers keep something. Jesus that's bullshit money.

But me and Maria never starve, because if I don't have anything to eat at Maria's, I go to my mother's, or my other sister's, who just lives down the block.

Sometimes my mother looks me out. Twenty dollars, here and there. Sometimes she gives me food stamps, like once a month.

Within a few weeks of this conversation; failing to meet the Housing Authority rent payments, Primo and Maria were evicted. They were forced to separate, each returning to their own mother's high-rise Housing Authority apartment located in different projects in the neighborhood.

Internalizing Unemployment

Over the next few months Primo's main strategy was to keep from facing the fact that he was locked out of the legal labor market. He escalated

his alcohol and narcotics use, and lashed out at the one person he still had power over: his girlfriend Maria. He lectured her righteously, for example, when she lost her job at Wendy's. Somehow, he managed to invert the traditional gender roles of who should be gainfully employed in a household, even while retaining the patriarch's prerogative of imposing family discipline.

Primo: I have to abuse that bitch verbally, because she doesn't do nothing for herself — like with school or nothing like that. She'd always rather be hugging me and kissing me, and not doing nothing.

But I handle it well. I talk to her. I'll get her sick with my lectures.

I think Maria should work at a McDonald's. Just to get that good work experience. But she doesn't want to do it. I've threatened that if she doesn't start working, I'm going to leave her.

I tell her "Go to a job center. Make a call." But instead she just misses her call; she just forgets about it.

Primo's longer-term defense mechanism was to take refuge in the ranks of what the economists euphemistically call "discouraged workers," the ones who are no longer registered as unemployed in the national statistics. He became just one more person contributing to what the statisticians described in the mid-1980s as "the spiralling decline" in the labor force participation rates of Puerto Ricans in New York City. Although the labor force participation rates of Puerto Rican men stabilized by the 1990 Census, New York-based Puerto Ricans continued to have some of the lowest rates of any ethnic group in the United States, with the exception of certain Native American peoples.³

Primo: My job searches have been fucked up. I didn't get hired nowhere. Not even as a porter at Woolworth's for four-forty an hour. Four dollars is wack and that's a union job.

So I don't think I'll find a job in a while, because I don't want to work for minimum wage. And I really won't honestly take a five dollars-an-hour job either, and they won't give me one anyhow.

I don't want to talk about it, Felipe.

I didn't see the point of me wasting a lot of money on train fare

going to interviews, and then not getting a place. I went to a lot of places, Felipe, and I got sick and tired of it. So that's how I ended up back here in the Game Room.

In fact, Primo did want to talk about it, except that he was only able to do so when he had drunk enough alcohol and sniffed enough cocaine and heroin to admit his deepest problems and anxieties. Primo's former lookout, Willie, happened to come home on furlough from the army during this difficult period, and at dusk we used to go to a nearby public school playground to share our problems with one another. We would crouch by one of the jungle gyms sheltered from gusts of wind and occasional police floodlights in order to lay out ten-dollar packets of cocaine and heroin side by side on the fat logs originally built for elementary school children to play on. As a friend of Primo's, I was worried about his escalating alcohol and narcotics consumption and I wanted him to confront his problems. Ironically, my tape recordings of Primo and Willie's depressed, almost stream-of-consciousness confessional dialogues, are punctuated by the background sounds of steerers calling out the brand names of the heroin they sold in the elementary playground: "Terminator," "Black Power," "DOA" [Dead on Arrival], "Rambo," "Poison." Not only was this particular schoolyard one of Manhattan's most active retail heroin markets, but it is also the site for the headquarters of the East Harlem School District.⁴

Primo: Okay, Okay, Felipe, I hear what you're saying. And so I drink and I sniff, and everything.

You say: I'm depressed. But when I'm under the influence it's like "fuck that." Maybe I spill my guts out. But I know that there's always tomorrow. Tomorrow is the next day. I'm gonna be sober, so I got time to think [sniffing from the pile of heroin and passing me a quart of Bacardi].

Willie: You know what it is Primo. [sniffing] You don't have nothing to look forward to. No job. You gotta have something to look for.

Primo: [continuing]: Tomorrow man . . . tomorrow is another day . . . [pointing to the cocaine and heroin].

Philippe: Tomorrow you're gonna have a hangover.

Primo: You know, I think I'm gonna be an alcoholic. Yeah, you

know, I gotta stop drinking, man. I gotta stop drinking. I'm gonna kill myself. I'm not getting anywhere. Yeah. Not getting anywhere.

Philippe: What does your mother think of your situation? Does it bother her? [passing the quart of Bacardi].

Primo: Hell yeah! [swigging] But this bothers me too Felipe! Mainly because I'm not getting any . . . any younger; I'm getting old and it would be like, "What if mommy ain't there?" And if mommy ain't there, my sisters definitely ain't with it. And if they don't want to look me out, then you know, I'll be like . . . like a bum . . . *un b6n todo aborchornado* [a down-and-out bum].

If I was to live in the City, I would have to be homeless. And if I don't find any work, how would I provide for myself to pay for an apartment to live in. You know they're so expensive now. I would have to sell drugs . . . or . . . or do something to be able to live.

Because if I wouldn't do that, I would be on welfare. I don't like to ask nobody for money, you know. I don't wanna ask anybody for nothing. I want to earn my money.

Willie: [interrupting] Yeah! Before it used to be everybody works, and welfare is like the lowest thing. But now it's like the style. Now practically everybody is on it, you know. But my family works. We never be on welfare.

Primo: Besides, welfare would put me into something. I would have to go to school, you know, or take some kind of training in order to keep getting the check.

So how would I be able to live by myself, support myself, and go to school, with the little bit of money I'm gonna get from welfare? I would have to do something to get the extra money to be able to live.

Willie: No Pops. [sniffing, then swigging] You know what your problem is? Your problem is that fast money. You got used to it . . . to being a lazy person and having somewhere to live; somewhere to eat; and somewhere to go at night.

Primo: You know why I didn't get a job? 'Cause I really got used to being a lazy person. I really got used to just . . .

Willie: Sleeping.

Primo: I really got used to getting fed at home . . . and not doing nothing to enhance my life. [sniffing and drinking]

Philippe: So how do you feel about that? How about helping your mother with some of the money you make at the Game Room? [swigging from the bottle]

Primo: That's it. My mother feeds me and gives me a room. I just take advantages of those things. [sniffing]

But I realize it. It makes me think, and I get upset, and I say, maybe if I don't hang out — like right now — I could just deal with the things I have to do.

Philippe: So why did you spend the money tonight on this shit? [pointing to the cocaine and heroin and then drinking from the quart of Bacardi and waving it]

Primo: And my mother be *dishing* me hard. Not for eating her food, because she don't want me to starve, but nobody likes to see somebody just living for free. [in Spanish] "You don't go to school. You don't do nothing. Why don't you go look for a job. You're not a little baby man. [throwing up his arms to imitate his mother's exasperation in an imaginary conversation with a friend] *El es un hombre ya* [He's a man already]."

Philippe: And how does that make you feel?

Primo: It makes me feel like she's right; and I have to get my act together; and make some money; and then be clean, and work.

To tell the truth, if I was to be working, man, my mother would even iron my clothing. I'd be walking around in ironed clothes. My mother wouldn't even bitch if Maria was to come over and maybe even spend the night.

Instead my mother makes it hard on me. "*Para que yo aprenda* [So that I learn]."

She works; my sisters work; everybody works! They been leading a nice quiet life. She wants to see me working and being somebody.

That's the way my mother is. She hates it when she gets up in the morning, and I'm sleeping. And then when she comes from work all tired and she sees me sitting like a king in a rocking chair in front of the television like a fucking *turista*. [splaying out his body like someone lounging in a hammock] She gets mad bro! [drinking]

And she's right. I have to make something of myself. I got to start, even if I don't have a job. I just gotta get my life back into the working world . . . and look for what I want.

Right now, to tell you the truth, I've just been a *vago* [lazy bum] – drunk and naked.

Willie: I'm just like you Primo. [drinking] I grew up with you at the same time. My mom's always worked too. She worked hard; she busted ass. She was a nurse's aide. You know she didn't make a lot of money; but we never be on welfare. And I feel like you.

But damn, man! It's hard. It is hard. I mean the fucking shit that I done been through. [sniffing from the heroin]

Primo: [sniffing from the cocaine] Okay, it's hard, but it's not impossible.

Willie: [reaching for the cocaine] But it's hard Pops. I been through such fuckin' dilemmas in my life.

Primo: Forget the past. Think about today; and then get to tomorrow.

I mean, if I'm living wrong I wanna be corrected. You and I are fucking up today, right? But tomorrow, you wake up. Even if it's with a hangover, you eat breakfast, or whatever, and you recover. 'Cause you have to do something to enhance your life for that day, and continue with tomorrow – if it has to be continued.

Willie: But, Primo, Primo, I'm so god damn lost in my life.

This particular night ended disastrously for Willie. Somehow he managed to beg ten dollars from both Primo and me, which set him off on an all-night crack binge.

During these particular months at the height of the recession in 1990, I was just cementing my friendship with Primo's mother. We spoke over the telephone and I could hear a tremendous frustration in her voice as she helplessly watched her son degenerate into open alcoholism and depression. To make matters worse, the water main in their project apartment had burst, and she and her daughters had to run back and forth to their neighbors' with buckets to fetch water. This plumbing crisis lasted for two weeks because they were always out at work when the building maintenance crews came to fix the pipes during the day. Primo was supposed to open the door for them, but he kept sleeping through their knocks.

Primo's mother: [in Spanish] He's always passed out on the couch like a drunk dog, coming home from the street at seven in the morning.

What a shame that at twenty-six he is still living with his mother. He should go find a woman and move out with her. I threw my husband out twenty-three years ago and Primo is just like him. He comes drunk from the street every morning.

He's always had bad friends. His teachers in school told me that; and he stopped going to school at fifteen because of bad friends.

He never really held a job for a long time. Just last month he only lasted two weeks at a job [the tuxedo rental store]. I lost money giving him money for car fare and food for lunch. He never even went back to pick up his paycheck.

I can't even leave beers in the refrigerator, he takes them for his friends.

And what would happen to me if I got sick and couldn't work? We'd lose the apartment!

To make matters worse, Primo and his mother fell victim to a \$2,400 job-training racket that preys on the false hopes of the unemployed. In a bogus mail-promotion scam, she "won" a half-price coupon to a so-called maintenance engineering training program that normally cost \$4,800. She immediately made the remaining down payment and forced Primo to go to classes. It turned out that the half-price deal depended on the client's qualifying for a federally guaranteed student loan grant for the "discounted" amount. Completely unaware of the implications and responsibilities involved, Primo signed himself up for a \$2,400 student loan. He enthusiastically threw himself into the program, bragging to Caesar and me about the "nineties and-eighties" he was "making" on the weekly "test'es." He began fantasizing about finding a stable job as a janitor, adding a classic rural Puerto Rican refrain, "*Si Dios quiere*" [God willing] – the Latino version of the Anglo expression "knock on wood" – every time he mentioned graduating from the training program or finding a job.

Primo's dream was dashed when his school declared bankruptcy before he had a chance to graduate from the program. Not only did his mother lose her \$2,400 cash-down payment, but he suddenly found himself responsible for the \$2,400 matching federal loan the job training program had processed for him. To make matters worse, Primo was in the midst of his second year-and-a-half-long trial for a hand-to-hand sale of two vials of crack to an undercover narcotics officer. I remember vividly

watching with surprise as Primo lowered his eyes submissively while his legal aid lawyer screamed at him on the courthouse steps.

What kinda fucking asshole are you? Just get a job! Any kind of bullshit job! So I can tell the judge you're a good man. Jesus Christ! Can't you understand what I'm telling you?

The fact was, of course, that in the midst of the national recession, Primo was unable to find "any kind of bullshit job." Caesar became his only source of solidarity and understanding. He empathized with Primo's depression and attempted to cheer his friend up with tirades embracing the ecstasy of substance abuse and celebrating the street-defined dignity of refusing to work honestly for low wages.

The most persuasive dimension to Caesar's oppositional celebration of street marginality was his cultural redefinition of crack dealing and unemployment as a badge of pride — even if ultimately self-destructive. For example, one Tuesday night right after the end of a busy shift at the Game Room, I accompanied Primo and Caesar on their way to buy a twenty-dollar bag of El Sapo Verde [the green roach], a new brand of cocaine with a growing reputation for quality that was sold a few blocks downtown from the Game Room. This was their first time purchasing from this outfit, so Caesar and I waited around the corner to avoid "petrolizing" [rendering paranoid] the sellers while Primo made the actual purchase. I struck up a conversation in Spanish with three undocumented Mexican immigrants from Piaxtla, a rural municipality in the state of Puebla. They were drinking beer on the stoop of their tenement watching with disdain as El Sapo Verde's customers passed by.

One of the immigrants had arrived two years ago and was earning \$500 a week fixing deep-fat fry machines. I put my arm around Caesar and asked the successful immigrant how it was possible that he was doing "so good" when my friend Caesar, an articulate, native-born, fluent-English speaker, could not even find a \$200-a-week position. His response was straightforwardly racist:

Okay, Okay I'll explain it to you in one word: Because the Puerto Ricans are stupid! Stupid! Do you understand? They're stupid because look at that guy [pointing to Caesar] he knows English.

And look at his body. He's got a body that at least should get him a job as good as mine. And he doesn't have it because he's a brute. That's all.

They like to make easy money. They like to leech off of other people. But not us Mexicans! No way! We like to work for our money. We don't steal. We came here to work and that's all.

A wave of fear swept over me as I looked at the expression on Caesar's face, convinced I had irresponsibly provoked a bloody confrontation. Instead, Caesar waited for Primo to return and then responded loudly in English, turning the Mexican's racist humiliation into a generationally based assertion of street culture pride.

Caesar: That's right my man! We is real vermin lunatics that sell drugs. We don't wanna be a part of society. It's like that record: "Fight the Power!"⁵

What do we wanna be working for? We came here to this country, and we abused the freedom, because Puerto Ricans don't like to work. We rather live off the system; gain weight; lay women.

Okay, maybe not all of us, 'cause there's still a lot of strict folks from the old school that still be working. But the new generation, no way!

We have no regard for nothing. The new generation has no regard for the public bullshit. We wanna make easy money, and that's it. Easy now mind you. We don't wanna work hard. That's the new generation for you.

Now the old school was for when we was younger, and we used to break our asses. I had all kinds of stupid jobs . . . scrap metal sorting, dry cleaning, advertising agencies.

But not no more. [putting his arm around Primo] Now we're in a rebellious stage. We rather evade taxes; make quick money; and just survive. But we're not satisfied with that either, ha!

Despite his public assertiveness, Caesar was ridden with self-doubt over his exclusion from mainstream society. At times, he too shared Primo's



A neighborhood bodega. Photo by Philippe Bourgois.

fantasies of being a "normal working nigga". His tolerance of exploitation, however, was lower than Primo's, and his sensitivity toward personal disrespect at work was much more acute. Furthermore, his social skills – or his cultural capital – that might have enabled him to interact credibly with middle-class society were even more limited than Primo's. Nevertheless, he too allowed himself to fantasize about "goin' legit" when opportunities presented themselves in contexts that were not completely anathema to the norms of street culture. For example, when Ray made his first concerted attempt to launder his crack profits by purchasing the lease on a bodega, Caesar jumped at the opportunity to work there. Ray

had hired Primo to clean and renovate the premises, and Primo, once again, subcontracted Caesar to be his assistant. It was a perfect opportunity for the two crack dealers to ease a transition to stable, legal employment. Not only would they maintain the same boss, but they would remain in the same immediate neighborhood vicinity. The bodega was located only half a block away from Ray's Social Club crackhouse next to the Hell Gate post office. In other words, they merely had to substitute lard, cigarettes, potato chips, sandwiches, beer, ice cream, and so forth for the crack they formerly purveyed to their neighbors.

Ray himself was also excited about his attempt to open a "legit place" for much the same reasons. In the early phase he proved to be an astute businessman, negotiating a discounted price for the storefront lease from the previous owner, who had been forced to flee the neighborhood after the "numbers" [gambling] racketeers who used the site as their bank torched the place following a dispute over profit shares. Primo's first tasks were to kill the rats, throw out the charred and decaying waterlogged merchandise, and eventually repaint the premises. Caesar was especially effective at killing the gigantic rats that had multiplied exponentially (as only rats can multiply in a New York City grocery store abandoned for more than a month following a fire). He relished crushing them with well-aimed bricks, broomsticks, and work boot kicks.

Despite the filth and the Hitchcockesque size and quantity of the rats infesting their new work space, both Caesar and Primo were thrilled at the prospects of "workin' clean" under Ray's auspices. During these weeks after finishing work, they would come over to my living room in their stinking clothes, with their wet sneakers caked in powdered rat poison and rotten grocery grime, in order to sniff speedballs, drink beer, and tape-record fantasies of their future stable careers at Ray's soon-to-be-opened bodega. Their enthusiasm over their imminent metamorphosis to legality once again expressed itself semantically in their internalization of the polite superstitions of their parents' jíbaro past.

Caesar: I haven't told Buena [grandma] yet. I ain't tellin' no one nothing until I be coming home paid every week. [slamming his fist into his palm and then bending over to sniff from the key-tip laden with heroin that Primo was serving him]

I'm not going to *salat*⁶ [jinx] but I think – *si Dios quiere* – this is the one thing that's going to work for me. I'm going to get off

hard-core drugs. [grinning and sniffing heroin again] Well, except maybe dope and coke.

And my career in here is going to escalate, because the more money the store makes, the more money I make, 'cause I'm the sandwich man. That means I'll probably have to be pulling a double shift.

This is good for us; this is good for Primo; we're close. No more of this bumming around. [waving his arm at my living room]

On this particular night, Caesar and Primo had also taken purple microdot capsules of synthetic mescaline. If, as some psychotherapists claim, hallucinogenic drugs unleash the anxieties, obsessions, and fantasies of one's unconscious, then Caesar's babbling reveals how profoundly excited he was over the possibility of finding legal employment.

I'm the sandwich- , the clean-up- , and the hurt-the-customer-man. And [flashing his eyes deviously] the scam-some-money-on-the-side-man.

Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! I'm also The Man – the bouncer. Because if I catch a shoplifter, when the cops come they're not going to have to handcuff him. They're going to have to bring a stretcher, because me and Primo are going to *stretch* someone right open.

[Grabbing my tape recorder and speaking into the microphone as if it inspired a brilliant idea] We make it a social club for informants, for Felipe. A club!

Dropping the tape recorder, Caesar began imitating the sounds of a cashier barking orders, and of change dropping in a cash register drawer while, at the same time, he made the deft motions of handing out imaginary sandwiches.

Caesar: Sandwich man! Here! Yo! Take yours! Ring! Clink! Next!

[sitting back on my living room couch wide-eyed] Wow, this is a weird . . . Primo, check this out.. [waving his hands to admire the mescaline-induced visual tracers] It's like wavy blue. [spinning around and pointing in the opposite direction at the ceiling] These are like purple.

[turning abruptly again to face me as if I were a customer at the deli]. Got money? [raising his arms like 'He-Man'] I work! [waving his hands, once again, to admire the color tracings, but then switching back and forth between the personas of a customer and a deli clerk] I want light blue. Sandwich! Sandwich man, how you doin'?

[sitting back again relaxed with a happy smile] All right! We're gonna open a deli! [reaching out to hug Primo]

Caesar's ecstatic legal dream never materialized. Ray was unable to negotiate the complicated New York City paperwork for health inspections and outstanding tax forfeitures. He never even managed to open his enterprise legally for a single day. He began selling without official permits for about ten days and soon realized there was not enough of a local demand for his grocery products. The final insult occurred when the man he hired to do inventory stole from him and escaped to Puerto Rico. Ray gave up and returned Primo and Caesar to their part-time positions at the Game Room selling crack on Monday and Tuesday nights.

The contrast between Ray's consistent failures at establishing viable, legal business ventures – that is, his deli, his legal social club, and his Laundromat – versus his notable success at running a complex franchise of retail crack outlets, highlight the different “cultural capitals” needed to operate as a private entrepreneur in the legal economy versus the underground economy. As the preceding chapter on crackhouse management demonstrates, Ray's mastery of street culture enabled him to administer his businesses effectively in the drug economy. He skillfully disciplined his workers and gauged the needs of his customers. He mobilized violence, coercion, and friendship in a delicate balance that earned him consistent profits and guaranteed him a badge of respect on the street. In contrast, in his forays into the legal economy, Ray's same street skills made him appear to be an incompetent, gruff, illiterate, urban jíbaro to the inspectors, clerks, and petty officials who allocate permits and inventory product, and who supervise licensing in New York City.

Similarly, when Primo attempted to establish a legitimate enterprise by pasting photocopied flyers at bus stops advertising his “Mr. Fix-It Services” for repairing domestic electronic appliances, he too failed miser-

ably despite his own obvious entrepreneurial skills as a crackhouse manager. When potential customers with broken appliances managed to reach him on the telephone at the project apartment of his girlfriend, Maria, they balked at the address he gave them and then usually declined his offer to come to their homes. Those who did not hang up on him were suspicious of his precapitalist, jíbaro way of setting prices. It ultimately became a forum for racist humiliation for Primo who was already feeling especially vulnerable in his attempt to "go legit."

Primo: It's like they hear my voice, and they stop. . . . There's a silence on the other end of the line.

Everyone keeps asking me what race I am. Yeah, they say, like, "Where're you from with that name?" Because they hear that Puerto Rican accent. And I just tell them that I'm Nuyorican. I hate that.

Plus I tell them they can pay me whatever they feel is right once I fix their shit. But they don't even want me to come over.

I hate that shit, Felipe.

Primo encountered further stereotyped barriers when he did manage to meet his legal customers face to face. For example, after arranging for him to fix three broken Dictaphone machines and a cable television box at a foundation where I had an affiliation, I received an apologetic computer E-mail from one of the administrators advising me not to bring Primo onto the premises anymore for fear patrons "might think we're turning the place into an electronic repair shop."

Not all of Primo's failures as a private entrepreneur were imposed by distrustful or racist customers. Some of his inability to run a profitable private enterprise was caused by his own jíbaro definitions of proper decorum and reciprocal obligation to friends and relatives. For example, when my mother asked him to examine her broken stereo system, he mysteriously missed several appointments to meet her at her apartment. He finally accompanied me to her apartment one evening at my insistence. He later admitted that it had not seemed proper to him to go alone to the apartment of a woman he did not know well. Finally, after successfully fixing her stereo, he did not know how much to charge her since she was my mother, and besides, she had prepared dinner for us in the process.

Pursuing the Immigrant's Dream

Mainstream society easily evokes racial stereotypes to dismiss Primo, Caesar, and even Ray as pathetic losers, or as lazy, pathological, self-destructive drug addicts. My examples framed by cultural production theory have emphasized the disjuncture in cultural styles of communication and the allocation of power around symbolic markers. A more political-economy understanding of the crack dealers' failures in the legal world would point to how they and their parents had been channeled into the most marginal economic sector almost since birth. I pursued this structural economic argument by asking them to talk extensively about their first "real" jobs. It became clear to me that in their early teenage years they had been energetically pursuing the immigrant's working-class dream of finding a tough, macho factory job and working hard for steady wages. One standard scenario emerges from the dozens of accounts I collected: With their mothers' permission they dropped out of high school – or even junior high school – to work in local factories. Usually within a year or two, their factories had closed down to seek cheaper labor elsewhere. They then began the treadmill of rotating from one poorly paid job to the next, with little education or social skills to allow them mobility outside of the marginal factory enclaves that trapped their entire social network.

Once again, Primo's and Caesar's cases are particularly illustrative of these dynamics. Primo was so highly motivated and energetic in pursuit of his mother's immigrant working-class dream that in his early teenage years he actually dropped out of junior high school to find a job through family connections.

Primo: I was playing hooky and pressing, like, dresses, and whatever they were making on the steamer. They was cheap, cheap clothes.

I was just a kid, and it used to be stupid hot behind the steamer, but I liked'ed that job. The best job I had was in that factory. Wish I would've lasted there, but they moved out of the neighborhood.

My mother's sister was working there first, and then her son, Luis' brother – the one who's in jail now – he was the one they hired first, because his mother agreed, "If you don't want to go to school, you gotta work."

In Search of Respect

He was young, he was . . . like sixteen or fifteen, I guess, and I was younger. So I started hanging out with him. Just hanging out, but then at the factory, sometimes he needed help with some rush work, and I used to go out and help him. And the boss used to look me out at the end of the week. I wasn't planning on working in the factory; I was supposed to be in school; but it just sort of happened.

I wanted to get paid and I hated school. I rather just work.

Predictably, Primo was working for a garment subcontractor — one of the most vulnerable niches in the manufacturing sector.

Primo: The boss was Spanish, and shit, but I don't know if she was the main man. She just ran the whole factory.

Her husband was a dope fiend, but he was the one that picked the payroll money up. We used to go downtown to do that shit, and it used to be white people who used to have a huge amount of money.

Primo and his cousin became the agents who physically moved their jobs out of the inner city. In the process they became merely two more individuals out of the 445,900 manufacturing workers in New York City who lost their jobs as factory employment dropped 50 percent from 1963 to 1983.⁷ Of course, instead of seeing themselves as the victims of a structural transformation, Primo remembers with pleasure, and even pride, the extra income he earned for clearing the machines out of the factory space:

Primo: Them people had money, man. Because we helped them move out of the neighborhood.

It took us two days — only me and my cousin. Wow! It was work. They gave us seventy bucks each, and back in them days that was money, boy! Plus, we were stupid little niggas.

Not coincidentally, Caesar interrupted this particular reminiscence of Primo's that I was tape-recording in the Game Room to give me an almost identical story. Like Primo, Caesar had obtained his first job through his family connections and their social network. Instead of the

At Work: Disrespect and Resistance

garment industry he was channeled into metallurgy, another one of the least desirable and most unstable niches within New York City's manufacturing sector:

Caesar: I worked in a factory before too. That was my first job. My uncle got me the job when I dropped out of school. My moms told me I either get a job or go back to school.

I liked 'ed it at that time; but I lost a lot of weight, because it used to be stupid hot in there. They used to give us these salt pills and shit.

They used to plate metal, like paint fake jewelry. But the company moved too.

Like Primo's aunt, Caesar's uncle subscribed to the same working-class ideologies about the dignity of hard work versus education. These are working-class rather than lumpen childhood memories. They are not yet imbued with the hopeless nihilism of the unemployable crack dealer. Objective conditions, however, prevented Primo and Caesar from achieving working-class stability. In Caesar's case, the limitations of tough, hard factory labor were driven home by the subsequent experience of his role-model uncle.

Caesar: Damn, man, that was my uncle's trade, metal salvaging and metal plating. That nigga' worked in there for about forty-five years, man. On one job. For forty-five years. Can you imagine that shit? Forty-five years and he's only a foreman.

And he fell in the acid one time and it was crazy, boy — the acid that they dip the metal in. I saw it. Yeah, it was fucked up. I saw it when he slipped.

That nigga' was out of work for at least like about seven, eight months, man. He burned his skin tissue off, man. I saw him all red, with, like, his muscles exposed. It was bugged.

He can't even sue, man. It was his own negligence, because he was the one that slipped in. You see, it was like an assembly line, and they have to be cleaning out these big tanks where they be dunking the metal pieces. So the nigga' was going in over the tanks one day, and he slipped. He fell in it, and jumped out real quick, less than five seconds, but his fuckin' clothes turned into rags,

HHIISSS, HHIISSS. He got dogged man. 'That nigga' screamed real loud.

After that he lost weight. He got like, REAL THIN, and he was all muscle before.

Significantly, in Caesar's uncle's case, the ultimate outcome of a lifetime of assembly line employment was sexual impotence and sterility, a theme the crack dealers often elaborated on when they talked of the powerlessness they experienced in their legal jobs.

Caesar: That's my uncle Joe, he's still fucked up. His whole, like, legs is all like, like, a burn victim whose skin is all burned.

He can't have no babies, man. Just dogs. Because he burnt his joint and everything, man.

He lives in Cincinnati now, 'cause the company moved, and they got him another position as a foreman at a factory that makes bathroom fixtures, and shit like that.

[snapping to attention and motioning for Primo to hide the purse with crack vials as a roving police car slowed down in front of the Game Room] Yo-yo-yo-yo! Static-static-static!

Retrospectively, Caesar's decision to drop out early from school with his family's blessing to find employment in a dead-end niche of New York's shrinking manufacturing sector appears tragically self-destructive. At the time it was taking place, however, fifteen-year-old Caesar looked and felt like a king within the confines of his second-generation immigrant's working-class universe. For a poor adolescent the decision to drop out of school to become a marginal factory worker was attractive. In separate conversations, Willie, the only member of Ray's network to have graduated from high school, confirmed how powerful and macho Caesar had appeared to him in his early teenage, hardworking glory:

Willie: I was fourteen and Caesar's like fifteen and the motherfucker dropped out of school and during this whole year he was working with his uncle chroming.

Mah' man was making himself some money, and I was going to school. I was so jealous. I was so jealous.

Caesar was always working. By eighth, ninth, . . . no by my

tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades, Caesar was working. He was a nice dresser 'cause he had money, and he used to get pussy, and everything.

After school I'd come home, and I'd say, "Yeah, Caesar's getting fucked, 'cause he ain't going to school, and he's got money."

Caesar was so bold. He didn't have like no fear. This was before we met you.

He was the first one who came out with fly clothes. Primo, you remember how C was in those days?

He always had a big box. And he used to hook me up outta sight, because I was always with Caesar out on the streets after school. Me and Caesar were so dope . . . so dope, that I never had to run the same coat each year.

Caesar used to wear a burgundy leather jacket and a burgundy Kangol. And we used to have these crowns, these gold crowns — right — that you put on a jacket — like those little things that you pin on your shirt and all that.

And we would be "king of the crew." That was the best time of my life.

Shattered Working-class Fantasies in the Service Sector

It almost appears as if Caesar, Primo, and Willie were caught in a time warp during their teenage years. Their macho-proletarian dream of working an eight-hour shift plus overtime throughout their adult lives at a rugged slot in a unionized shop has been replaced by the nightmare of poorly paid, highly feminized, office-support service work. The stable factory-worker incomes that might have allowed Caesar and Primo to support families have largely disappeared from the inner city. Perhaps if their social network had not been confined to the weakest sector of manufacturing in a period of rapid job loss, their teenage working-class dreams might have stabilized them for long enough to enable them to adapt to the restructuring of the local economy. Instead, they find themselves propelled headlong into an explosive confrontation between their sense of cultural dignity versus the humiliating interpersonal subordination of service work.

Formerly, when most entry-level jobs were found in factories, the contradiction between an oppositional street culture and traditional

working-class, shop-floor culture — especially when it was protected by a union — was less pronounced. I do not wish to romanticize factory work. It is usually tedious, tiring, and often dangerous. Furthermore, it is inevitably rife with confrontational hierarchies. On the shop floor, however, surrounded by older union workers, high school dropouts who are well versed in the latest and toughest street culture styles function effectively. In the factory, being tough and violently macho has high cultural value; a certain degree of opposition to the foreman and the “bossman” is expected and is considered masculine.

In contrast, this same oppositional street-identity is dysfunctional in the service-sector, especially among the office-support workers who serve the executives of the FIRE sector, where most of the new entry-level jobs with a potentially stable future are located. Street culture is in direct contradiction to the humble, obedient modes of subservient social interaction that are essential for upward mobility in high-rise office jobs. Workers in a mail room or behind a photocopy machine cannot publicly maintain their cultural autonomy. Most concretely, they have no union; more subtly, there are few fellow workers surrounding them to insulate them and to provide them with a culturally based sense of class solidarity. Instead they are besieged by supervisors and bosses from an alien, hostile, and obviously dominant culture. When these office managers are not intimidated by street culture, they ridicule it. Workers like Caesar and Primo appear inarticulate to their professional supervisors when they try to imitate the language of power in the workplace, and instead stumble pathetically over the enunciation of unfamiliar words. They cannot decipher the hastily scribbled instructions — rife with mysterious abbreviations — that are left for them by harried office managers on diminutive Post-its. The “common sense” of white-collar work is foreign to them; they do not, for example, understand the logic in filing triplicate copies of memos or for postdating invoices. When they attempt to improvise or show initiative, they fail miserably and instead appear inefficient — or even hostile — for failing to follow “clearly specified” instructions.

Their interpersonal social skills are even more inadequate than their limited professional capacities. They do not know how to look at their fellow service workers — let alone their supervisors — without intimidating them. They cannot walk down the hallway to the water fountain without unconsciously swaying their shoulders aggressively as if patrol-

ling their home turf. Gender barriers are an even more culturally charged realm. They are repeatedly reprimanded for offending co-workers with sexually aggressive behavior.

The cultural clash between white “yuppie” power and inner-city “scrambling jive” in the service sector is much more than superficial style. Service workers who are incapable of obeying the rules of interpersonal interaction dictated by professional office culture will never be upwardly mobile. In the high-rise office buildings of midtown Manhattan or Wall Street, newly employed inner-city high school dropouts suddenly realize they look like idiotic buffoons to the men and women for whom they work. This book’s argument — as conveyed in its title — is that people like Primo and Caesar have not passively accepted their structural victimization. On the contrary, by embroiling themselves in the underground economy and proudly embracing street culture, they are seeking an alternative to their social marginalization. In the process, on a daily level, they become the actual agents administering their own destruction and their community’s suffering.

Getting “Dissed” in the Office

Both Primo and Caesar experienced deep humiliation and insecurity in their attempts to penetrate the foreign, hostile world of high-rise office corridors. Primo had bitter memories of being the mail room clerk and errand boy at a now defunct professional trade magazine. Significantly, the only time he explicitly admitted to having experienced racism was when he described how he was treated at that particular work setting. The level of racially charged cultural miscommunication at his work site is nicely illustrated by his inability to identify the name and ethnicity of his boss, just as she might have been unsure of what Latin American country he was from, and how to spell or pronounce his first name:

Primo: I had a prejudiced boss. She was a fucking “ho’,” Gloria. She was white. Her name was Christian. No, not Christian, Kirschman. I don’t know if she was Jewish or not.

She would like to talk about me to whoever was over visiting in the office — you know, like her associates who would come over for a coffee break.

In Search of Respect

When she was talking to people she would say, "He's illiterate," as if I was really that stupid that I couldn't understand what she was talking about.

So what I did one day — you see they had this big dictionary right there on the desk, a big heavy motherfucker — so what I just did was open up the dictionary, and I just looked up the word, "illiterate." And that's when I saw what she was calling me.

So she's saying that I'm stupid or something. I'm stupid! [pointing to himself with both thumbs and making a hulking face] "He doesn't know shit."

The most profound dimension of Primo's humiliation was not being called illiterate but, rather, having to look up in the dictionary the words used to insult him. In contrast, in the underground economy Primo never had to risk this kind of threat to his self-worth.

Primo: Ray would never disrespect me that way, because he wouldn't tell me that because he's illiterate too, plus I've got more education than him. I almost got a GED.

Worse yet, Primo genuinely attempted to show initiative at Gloria Kirschman's magazine-publishing company, but the harder he tried, the stupider he felt when he inevitably failed. As he explains, "It only gets worse when they get to know you."

Primo: So you, you know, you try to do good, but then people treat you like shit.

Man, you be cool at first, and then all of a sudden, when they get to know you, they try to diss you.

When I first got to my jobs, I was busting my ass and everything, but after a while, it's like, you get to hate your supervisor.

I was disrespected a few times at that job when I didn't follow, like, the orders. When my supervisor told me to do a job one way, but I thought it was best to do it another way. She dissed the shit out of me a coupla' times. That lady was a bitch.

Quite simply, Primo was being exposed to the fact that he did not have the cultural or symbolic capital that would have allowed him to step

At Work: Disrespect and Resistance

out from behind the photocopy machine or the mail meter. He was claustrophobically surrounded by overseers from an alien but powerful culture:

Primo: I had to be cool. Even when we used to get our lunch breaks, when we were supposed to be able to just hang, even then, the supervisors were right there.

Primo was both unwilling and unable to compromise his street identity and imitate the professional modes of interaction that might have earned him the approval and respect of his boss. It is precisely in moments like this that one can see institutionalized racism at work in how the professional service sector unconsciously imposes the requisites of Anglo, middle-class cultural capital. His boss forbade him to answer the telephone, because objectively a Puerto Rican street accent will discourage prospective clients and cause her to lose money. Ironically, the confrontation over Primo using the telephone occurred because he had been attempting to show initiative and good faith by answering calls when he saw that his supervisors were busy or out of the office.

Primo: I wouldn't have mind that she said I was illiterate. What bothered me was that when she called on the telephone, she wouldn't want me to answer even if my supervisor — who was the receptionist — was not there and the phone be ringing for a long time.

So when I answered it, my boss sounds like she's going to get a heart attack when she hears my voice. She'd go, "Where's Renee?" — Renee Silverman — that's the receptionist, my supervisor.

I'd say, "She's out to lunch" — or whatever.

And she would go, "Is Fran there?"

I'd say, "Yes she is."

But, you see, it wasn't Fran's job to answer the phones. She was taking care of the bills and always busy doing some work. So I just said, "She's probably out to lunch too."

That boss was just a bitch, because I answered the phone correct. There are so many different kinds of people out there in New York City that've got a crazy accent. They could be into real estate; they

In Search of Respect

could be into anything. They just got their own accent. But that bitch didn't like my Puerto Rican accent.

I don't know what was her problem; she's a fucking bitch.

Okay, maybe I don't have the education to type; so I will not type. But don't diss me for answering the phones instead of letting it ring forever. Maybe it's important! Bitch!

I used to answer it pretty well, man. But then after that — after she dished me — when I did pick up the phone, I used to just sound Porta'rrrrican on purpose. Fuck it.

The Gender Diss

The contemporary street sensitivity to being dissed immediately emerges in these memories of office humiliation. The machismo of street culture exacerbates the sense of insult experienced by men because the majority of office supervisors at the entry level are women. Hence the constant references to bosses and supervisors being "bitches" or "ho's" [whores], and the frequent judgmental descriptions of their bodies. On numerous occasions in the Game Room, or after hours in my living room, or on the street, Caesar interrupted Primo's accounts of legal employment with his own memories of workplace humiliation. For example, in the middle of Primo's "telephone diss" story he launched into a tirade of male outrage at having been forced, in the legal labor market, to break the street taboo against public male subordination to a woman:

Caesar: I had a few jobs like that where you gotta take a lot of shit from fat, ugly bitches and be a wimp.

My worst was at Sudler & Hennessey — the advertising agency that works with pharmaceutical shit. I didn't like it but I kept on working, because "Fuck it!" you don't want to fuck up the relationship. So you just be a punk.

Oh my God! I hated that head supervisor. She was a bitch, Peggy MacNamara. She was an Irishwoman. She was beautiful, but that bitch was *really* nasty.

She used to make me do fucked-up errands for her — wack shit. One time I had to go all the way to Staten Island and find this fuckin' place, and go collect two paintings for her. And shit like that. That bitch just didn't like me.

At Work: Disrespect and Resistance

She got her rocks off on firing people, man. You can see that on her face, boy. She made this fucking guy cry — he was Eye-talian — and beg for his job, and shit. And then she gave him his job back and put him on probation, like that. [snapping his fingers and shaking his head in disgust]

And then I heard her, like, laughing about it with the other supervisors, like, joking about it.

Ultimately the gender disses respond to economic inequality and power hierarchies. The crack dealers' experience of powerlessness is usually expressed in a racist and sexist idiom. For example, even though Caesar, like Primo, is incapable of reading the white ethnic markers of his supervisors, he is clearly aware of the economic and racial facts of his marginal niche in the labor hierarchy:

Primo: I lasted in that mail room for like eight months. They used to trust me. I used to go to the bank, get the checks, the payroll, and hand out the payroll to all the executives.

Damn, there was this one bitch, her name was Inga . . . Hoffman . . . no, it was Hawthorne, 'cause she was Jewish. Well, that bitch used to get paid well, boy! I used to put the fuckin' check up to the light to see.

That bitch was making about five thousand dollars a week, man! You could see [squinting at an imaginary envelope] like, five thousand three hundred and forty three dollars and change.

I was like, "Oh, my God!" Yeah, Hoffman, that bitch, was well paid, man.

Mine's was the lowest paid job there. Shit, that was what drove me out of it. I was just scum-a'-the-earth Porta' Rican nigga'.

In the lowest recesses of New York City's FIRE sector, tens of thousands of messengers, photocopy machine operators, and security guards serving the Fortune 500 companies are brusquely ordered about by young white executives — often female — who sometimes make bimonthly salaries superior to their underlings' yearly wages. The extraordinary wealth of Manhattan's financial district exacerbates the sense of sexist-racist insult associated with performing just-above-minimum-wage labor.

Work Site Wars

The remarkable profitability of New York's financial service companies allows management to pay arbitrary bonuses to even the most lowly employees. This co-opts whatever solidarity and resistance might have been fomented in the mail room or behind the photocopy machines as the low-wage workers involute their energies, backbiting one another in a jealous scramble for tips and extra perks.

Caesar: My supervisor was a greedy nigga'. He's always wanting to know how much I get paid 'cause they give you bonuses on holidays — like at Christmas — and the bonuses go up by the years. My bonus was three hundred dollars.

Primo: [gasping] That's a lot of money. I never got more than twenty-five, fifty dollars.

Caesar: So when my supervisor found out how much I got, the nigga' got on the phone, and started complaining hard:

"Ah, why, uhuh" [clumsily imitating an office telephone voice] — that's the way they spoke there — "Why did the mail room clerk get a three hundred dollar bonus, and he only been here eight months, and I've been here nine years, and I only got four hundred dollars. I think you made a mistake."

You see he was telling them he should get more, and I should get less. I never shoulda told him how much I got.

This son of a bitch was pissed off. I don't know if they gave him more, but after a while he started complaining to me about everything. He was on my case.

In the less-well-established FIRE service sector industries the infighting among the entry-level workers and their immediate supervisors results in job loss. This had been Primo's experience in the highly specialized and vulnerable desktop-publishing industry. Despite learning some computer skills, he still lacked the cultural capital to be able to compete effectively according to professional workplace rules. When a fluctuation in the demand for annual reports or for merger and acquisition agreements occurred, he was the first fired. Once again, his anger over losing his job fixates misogynously on the humiliation of having been the victim of a more powerful female supervisor. He redundantly punctuates

his sentences with the term "bitch" and makes repeated references to his nemesis' body. In fact, he even concludes with the classic, violent fantasy of following his supervisor after work to dominate her physically in the most traditional patriarchal setting of all — her home. His repeated sniffs from a ten-dollar bag of cocaine while he was talking seemed to fuel his ire and frustration at the unpleasant memories.

Primo: My problem was that my supervisor was just a bitch who liked to make sure I'm doing my job all the time, even when it used to be slow, and she didn't need to be hawking me that way.

I was responsible there. The worst thing I did was fall asleep, 'cause they switched me onto the night shift. That's what got me fired. [sniffing cocaine]

That bitch — I hate her. She was a big, fat woman, and they hired her after me. She was just working there months too, man — that bitch — before she got me fired.

I used to do telecommunications too. [enthusiastically] On this other Kaypro computer I'd be sending files over to Boston [pointing officiously into the distance]. I took care of all those things, the computer, cleaning the machines — even bringing up the system when it locks down. Crazy shit! I used to have my own file, too.

But I was falling asleep, man, sometimes I used to fall asleep, like on the chair, with a terminal right there, and running.

And when I used to wake up, there's people doing my work; and I'd just get up real quick, and send them back, like, "No, no, it's okay — okay, shit! I could lose my job. I have to do my job." [sniffing again]

But the supervisor of the night shift — the fat bitch — was already writing me down.

I used to find her letters about me in the terminal. 'Cause I know, when you have a file on the terminal in the system, you have a password. So I used to just figure out their password.

I would go [squinting with feigned concentration], "They probably used their last name, their first name, their nickname." I used to keep trying all those names until I get into their files. So I knew the file of the main supervisor from that section. I used to find all her letters she used to write about me. [sniffing again]

I used to look at her and want to kill her; wanted to burn her.

She used to live in a little trailer thing, I used to want to catch her and – I used to think of all the most miserable shit to do to her.

I could tell she didn't like me.

I told the company that she falls asleep on the job too. Sometimes she goes to the back and falls asleep on the floor.

But they told me, "Yeah, but she signs out for that time. She signs out, and signs back in when there's work."

They should have told me to sign out when they see me asleep, then sign back in. But I guess she's a supervisor and I'm just a nobody.

Primo's white-collar enemy was obviously invulnerable to his attempts at revenge. Ultimately, he realized that his fundamental vulnerability at the work site was structural rather than merely the result of his negative personal relationship with his immediate supervisor.

Primo: I had been there a long time. The problem was that they were really coming down on a lot of the employees. I was one of the lucky ones. They were waiting for any little mixup that we might do. They were looking for reasons to let people go, just like that. [snapping his fingers]

They weren't hiring nobody. The only ones that stayed were the ones that were working there first, which was John, and Art Schwartz, and this other tall white guy.

Philippe: And how did that make you feel?

Primo: [sniffing cocaine in each nostril pensively] When I found out I wanted to cry, man. My throat got dry, I was like . . . [gasping and waving his arms as if suffocating, then sniffing more cocaine]

You see, I had went to pick up my check, but before getting my check, there was a little hassle, and they called me to the office.

I was like, "Oh *shit!*" [sniffing again]

But I couldn't get through to them. I even told them, "I'll let you put me back to messenger, I will take less pay, just keep me employed. I need the money; I need to work; I got a family.

They said [feigning dismissive authority], "Nope, nope, nope."

So I said, "Okay." I left.

My friends were waiting for me outside. I was fucked man. All choked up.

Relationships with supervisors and bosses do not have to be malicious to be humiliating or otherwise intolerable by street culture standards. In Primo's previous job at the trade magazine publishing house, for example, his boss, Gloria Kirschman, had probably been a well-meaning liberal. Reading between the lines of Primo's vilifying account, one suspects that she cared about the future of the bright, energetic high school dropout working for her. At one point, she took him aside to advise him to "go back to school." This is how her well-intentioned – and objectively accurate – advice sounded to Primo, however:

Primo: If you're young, you're a fucking idiot if you're working.

My boss, she wanted me to go to school too. Well fuck her, man! I'm here and I'm working. I want my money.

And they talk about that school shit 'cause they're pampered, they lead pampered lives. Everybody can't go to school a lot. Some people have to live, man. They got to eat – you know what I'm saying? People got to eat, man. Especially if you got a son, you got to . . . people got to do things.

I was eighteen then and Papito, my son, was already born. I mean, you want things in the world. You can't wait for some fuckin' degree.

She had no business worrying about my schooling.

Caesar: I don't see how learning about George Washington crossing the fucking Delaware is going to help you in this fucking world.

Primo: Like, teach me how to write the letters to other companies. English – [turning to Caesar] that's what they call English – and reading and writing.

Primo had no frame of reference to interpret and understand the office work tasks that Gloria Kirschman insisted he perform.

I didn't like working there at all, anyway. I didn't want to be doing no collating, or no mail shit.

Plus, she used to have me look in this closet and put everything together . . . I forgot the names of those things . . . oh yeah, she would call it, "Make an inventory."

I didn't even know what the hell those things were — an inventory? Anyway, the closet was a mess. So I just like thought, "I should throw some of this shit away. Just to make it look neater."

So I just threw it all out, 'cause I knew she was never gonna use any of that stuff again.

In his confusion over the ostensibly irrational mysteries of office work, Primo worried about a repeat of the illiteracy insult. He was constantly on guard lest Gloria Kirschman disrespect him without his being immediately aware of what was happening. Consequently, when she ordered him to perform mysteriously specific tasks, such as direct mailings of promotional materials that required particular conjugations of folding, stuffing, or clipping, he activated his defense mechanisms. His mother's inner-city apartment project mailbox address is only rarely targeted by direct-mail campaigns, and consequently Primo had no frame of reference for understanding the urgency of the precision with which Gloria oversaw the logistics of her direct mailings. Instead, she appeared overbearingly oppressive and insulting to him. In fact, he even suspected Gloria was superstitious and arbitrary in the rigor and anxiety with which she supervised every detail of the direct-mailing packets he was preparing.

Weapons of the Weak

Primo refused to accept the "flexibility" that these delicate, targeted mailing campaigns required — that is, late-night binges of collating and recollating to make bulk-rate postage deadlines coincide with the magazine's printing and sales deadlines. It was offensive and sexually inappropriate to Primo to have to bring over the assembled promotional packets to Gloria's home for last-minute, late-night inspections.

Primo: It would be late, and I would be at the office to do these rush jobs; collate them, staple them, fold them in the correct way . . . whatever way she said. It was always different.

And it had to be just the way she wanted it. I'd stuff them just

the right way [making frantic shuffling motions with his hands] and then seal the shit.

I used to hate that. I would box it and take it to the Thirty-eight Street post office at ten-thirty at night.

But then sometimes she would call me from home, and I would have to bring papers up to her house on Seventy-ninth Street and Third Avenue [Manhattan's Silk Stocking district] just to double-check my work. She had to check every single envelope. And she always used to find a paper that I had folded just wrong.

And she would try to offer me something to eat and I would say firmly, "No, thank you." Because she would try to pay me with that shit; 'cause she's a cheap bitch.

She'd say, "You want pizza, tea, or cookies." She had those Pepperidge Farm cookies.

But I wouldn't accept anything from her. I wasn't going to donate my time man.

She thought I was illiterate. She thought I was stupid. Not me boy! Charge *every penny*. [grinning] From the moment I leave the office, that's overtime, all the way to her house. That's time and a half.

I used to exaggerate the hours. If I worked sixteen, I would put eighteen or twenty to see if I could get away with it — and I would get away with it. I'm not going to do that kind of shit for free.

And that bitch was crazy. She used to eat baby food. I know, 'cause I saw her eating it with a spoon right out of the jar.

If Primo appeared to be a scowling, ungrateful, dishonest worker to Gloria, then Gloria herself looked almost perverted to Primo. What normal middle-aged woman would invite her nineteen-year-old employee into her kitchen late at night and eat baby food in front of him? Ironically, it was precisely by showing eager flexibility during these emergency late-night binges to complete direct-mailing campaigns that Primo might have earned a promotion — or at least job stability — at Gloria's magazine. She probably saw herself as bending over backward to be trusting and friendly to her shy, moderately hostile employee by inviting him into her kitchen and offering him a friendly snack.

In any case, Primo's working-class victories over his employer proved to be Pyrrhic. His definition of worker rights was still based on the

conceptions that emerged out of generations of factory floor confrontations where self-respecting hourly wage earners always demand time and a half once they have completed their eight-hour shifts. In the cross-cultural confrontation taking place in the corridors of high-rise office buildings, one never gets promoted if one requests overtime. The "paper trail" rather than collective-bargaining contracts predicates survival.

Entry-level inner-city workers are also hindered by the fact that the vocabulary used in office work performance evaluations has no counterpart in street culture. When someone like Primo or Caesar is "terminated," the personnel report might contain a series of notations: "lack of initiative," "inarticulate," or "no understanding of the purpose of the company." Primo realizes that in street English these evaluations mean "she's saying to her associates that I'm stupid." He cannot improve his performance at work, however, without jeopardizing the basic foundations of his definition of personal dignity. Consequently, at Gloria's trade magazine Primo was the first person to fall victim to one of the periodic economic retrenchments characteristic of this highly specialized subsector, which fluctuates with the changing whims and fashions of upper-class culture.

Primo: I had to leave that job because my hours were cut down. I think it was four and a half hours a day, and then some days she would cut me out the whole full day. There was like less work to do.

I already had my son, Papito, and expenses. Sandra, my son's mother, was on public assistance. But that's not enough. She worked off the books; but she was just surviving. Her cousin . . . or somebody . . . the next-door neighbor used to baby-sit while she worked.

Sandra would look them out, but it was hard because she was giving them half of her . . . whatever-she-makes-a-day, to whoever was baby-sitting. It was like minimum wage.

She was working hard for bullshit.

So that's why I had to find a new job. My boss had me on restricted hours, and I can't even work overtime.

Although Primo and Caesar were at the very bottom of the office service-work hierarchies of the FIRE sector, they were not completely

powerless. Nonunion service workers in high-rise office buildings can draw on much the same repertoires of work site resistance that masses of dominated people from agricultural serfs to apprentice artisans to modern-day housekeepers have always engaged in: foot dragging, attitudinal opposition, and petty theft.⁸ This kind of purposeful disgruntlement, however, is particularly unacceptable in the new office service sector, where "attitude" – enthusiasm, initiative, and flexibility – often determines who is fired and who is promoted. Oppositionally defined cultural identities that were legitimate on the factory shop floor – and even served to ritualize and stabilize management-worker confrontations – are completely unacceptable in the FIRE sector, where upper middle-class Anglo modes of interaction prevail with a vengeance.

In contrast to the unionized factory worker, low-echelon service sector employees in the FIRE sector have no formal institutional channels to legitimize or to render productive their dissatisfaction with their working conditions. The result is an alienated "working-class culture" isolated within the extremely limited autonomous confines that entry-level office employees are able to carve out for themselves. Caesar noticed this right away in the mail room of his pharmaceutical advertising agency:

Caesar: I used to get there late, but the other workers wasn't never doing shit. They was *lazy* motherfuckers – even the supervisor.

They all be sitting, asking each other questions over the phone, and fooling with video games on the computer. And that's all you do at a place like that.

My boss, Bill, be drinking on the sneak cue, and eating this bad-ass sausage.

Both Primo and Caesar, however, preferred to engage in a more instrumental and personally satisfying form of powerless revenge: stealing on the job.

Primo: I used to do all the Express Mail. Yeah, it was nine dollars and thirty-five cents and they would give me ten-dollars to take it to the post office. But instead, I would just slide the envelope through the Pitney-Bowes [postage-meter machine] and drop it in the nearest mailbox.

Primo was particularly proud of how effectively he pilfered from his employer, Gloria Kirschman, who had called him illiterate. Indeed, within a few months of being hired, Primo excelled at concocting scams that manipulated double invoicing and interchanging receipts – skills not usually associated with illiteracy:

Primo: One time, I just took eighty dollars from this petty-cash money box that they kept with the receptionist in the front office. [sniffing heartily from a packet of heroin that he had placed on my living room coffee table]

I didn't just steal the eighty dollars. I knew the ropes to the place. I was doing everything ahead of time.

You see, when I first started working there, I used to bring all the receipts from everything. And, I used to borrow money sometimes from petty cash, and I would have to pay it back when I get paid. Gloria was so fucking cheap, always bitching because the receipts' not in the right place, and then complaining, 'cause I'm answering the phones, and I'm illiterate.

Well, she didn't keep good inventory. Nothing was accurate there. So she would send me to get Xeroxes, but I would already know the price, because I had already called the Xerox place to see how much they going to charge me for how much she was going to give me. Like, how much copies, whatever size, eight and a half by eleven.

And then I told the lady at the front office, the receptionist, to give me eighty bucks so I'll be able to pay for the stuff.

So I asked Gloria [sniffing more heroin], the bitch, my boss, "Do you want this paid by cash or check?"

She told me, "By check." [giggling] So I got a check for eighty bucks and kept the cash and put the receipt from the Xerox place into the petty-cash box. Nobody figured it out. [chuckling]

That bitch was stupid. She bitches so much, and she wasn't even doing anything correct. [laughing hard]

Primo's laughter was cut short in this particular conversation when he suddenly lurched in the direction of my apartment's bathroom, vomiting on my living room rug, prompting Caesar to call with protective concern:



Self-portrait of a crack dealer wearing his gold chain and medallion. This particular dealer competed directly with the Game Room, and he marked his sales site with his graffiti art. Photo by Philippe Bourgois.

Caesar: Oh man! You all right, Primo? I keep telling you, man, you're a light nigga'. You can't be sniffing so much dope all at once. [dipping his house key into the packet of heroin and sniffing dryly into each nostril]

"Fly Clothes" and Symbolic Power

Not all forms of resistance to marginal legal employment are so instrumental and practical. On a deeper level, the entire foundation of street

culture and the unwillingness of people like Primo and Caesar to compromise their street identity is a refusal to accept marginalization in the mainstream professional world. The oppositional identities of street culture are both a triumphant rejection of social marginalization and a defensive — in some cases terrorized — denial of vulnerability. The ways office dress codes become polarized provide insight into this complex dynamic because clothing is a concretely visible arena encapsulating symbolic, or cultural, conflict. To my surprise, many of the crack dealers cited their inappropriate wardrobes and the imposition of demeaning dress codes as primary reasons for shunning legal employment. At first I dismissed the issue as trivial. It took me several months to realize how centrally this symbolic expression of identity articulates with power relations in the labor market.

The oppositional meaning of "subcultural style" among youths and marginalized sectors of society has long fascinated sociologists.⁹ Much of that material romanticizes and exoticizes the real pain of social marginalization. In contrast, of course, seen through the eyes of mainstream America, an inner-city youth's preoccupation with "fly clothes" only confirms a stereotype of immaturity, petty irrationality, or even personal pathology.

When young inner-city men and women are forced to submit to powerful white women in the entry levels of the office-worker labor force, physical appearance becomes a fierce arena for enforcing or contesting power. Of course, on a more general level, this occurs whenever the crack dealers or anyone engrossed in street culture venture into the middle-class white world that dominates most public space beyond inner-city confines. Caesar, for example, highlights his experience of this tension in his angry reminiscences of office workplace confrontations. He had no idea when his clothes would elicit ridicule or anger. His vulnerability and powerlessness outside the street context is clearly expressed in his anger over the "flexible" job description of his FIRE service-sector position. He mediates his objective powerlessness at work, through his preoccupation with the confusing office dress code.

Caesar: When I worked at Sudler & Hennessey, the pharmaceutical advertising agency, they had a dress code and shit like that. I wore the tie for about three weeks, but, uh, . . . Bob — I mean Bill — he was my supervisor, an Irish son of a bitch, an old white

guy — he told me I didn't really have to wear a tie if I didn't want to. So I didn't.

Because for some reason, since I was new, like the new mail clerk there, and they was remodeling and shit, they wanted me to do like, all this wild work. I'd be taking down shelves, clearing dust, sweeping — dirty work.

I mean I didn't wanna really do construction work in my good clothes. But I couldn't come in bummy, because my supervisor would tell me, "Why you coming in like that?" Or "Why you dressed like that for?" He meant, "Like a hoodlum." But I dressed good, like in nice baggies, and fancy shoes, and nice paisley shirts.

But what I didn't like was that construction wasn't in my job description. I got hired to be a mail room clerk right. They never told me that they were going to be remodeling shit.

But then they had that dress code right. I hated that shit. You see I didn't have no clothes back then because I was still goin' on mission [crack binges]. So really, like my first paycheck went for clothes, but then I had to replace the clothes I had fucked up at work.

In much the same way that Primo was humiliated by having to look up the word "illiterate" in the dictionary, Caesar was hurt when his supervisor accused him of "looking like a hoodlum" on the days when he thought he was actually dressing well. His problem was not merely that he did not have enough money to buy clothes but, rather, that he had no idea of which clothes to choose when he went to buy them. Losing this particular struggle over cultural capital has to be profoundly disorienting to the kind of person whose fly clothes on the street have always made him "king of the crew," as Caesar's teenage friend Willie had assured me in a conversation cited earlier in this chapter.

In the same vein, several months earlier, I had watched Primo drop out of a "motivational training" employment program in the basement of his mother's housing project, run by former heroin addicts who had just received a multimillion-dollar private sector grant for their innovative approach to training the "unemployable." Primo felt profoundly disrespected by the program, and he focused his discontent on the humiliation he faced because of his inappropriate wardrobe. The fundamental philosophy of such motivational job-training programs is that "these people have

an attitude problem." They take a boot camp approach to their unemployed clients, ripping their self-esteem apart during the first week in order to build them back up with an epiphanic realization that they want to find jobs as security guards, messengers, and data-input clerks in just-above-minimum-wage service sector positions. The program's highest success rate has been with middle-aged African-American women who want to terminate their relationship to welfare once their children leave home.

I originally had a "bad attitude" toward the premise of psychologically motivating and manipulating people to accept boring, poorly paid jobs. At the same time, however, the violence and self-destruction I was witnessing at the Game Room was convincing me that it is better to be exploited at work than to be outside the legal labor market. In any case, I persuaded Primo and a half-dozen of his Game Room associates — including Candy and Little Pete, who was then managing the Social Club crackhouse on La Farmacia's corner — to sign up for the program. Even Caesar was tempted to join.

None of the crack dealers lasted for more than three sessions of the job training program. Primo was the first to drop out after the first day's registration and pep talk. For several weeks he avoided talking about the experience. I repeatedly pressed him to explain why he "just didn't show up" to the free job-training sessions. Only after repeated badgering on my part did he finally express the deep sense of shame and vulnerability he experienced whenever he attempted to venture into the legal labor market. In the particular case of the motivational employment program, clothes and appearance — style, once again — were the specific medium for resisting the humiliation of submission to a menial position in the service sector labor market.

Philippe: Yo Primo, listen to me. I worry that there's something taking place that you're not aware of, in terms of yourself. Like the coke that you be sniffing all the time; it's like every night.

Primo: What do you mean?

Philippe: Like not showing up at the job training. You say it's just procrastination, but I'm scared it's something deeper that you're not dealing with. Like wanting to be partying all night, and sniffing. Maybe that's why you never went back.

Primo: The truth though — listen Felipe — my biggest worry was

the dress code, 'cause my gear is limited. I don't even got a dress shirt, I only got one pair of shoes, and you can't wear sneakers at that program. They wear ties too — don't they? Well, I ain't even got ties — I only got the one you lent me.

I would've been there three weeks in the same gear: T-shirt and jeans. *Estoy jodido como un bñ!* [I'm all fucked up like a bum!]

Philippe: What the fuck kinda bullshit excuse are you talking about? Don't tell me you were thinking that shit. No one notices how people are dressed.

Primo: Yo, Felipe, this is for real! Listen to me! I was thinking about that shit hard. Hell yeah!

Hell yes they would notice, because I would notice if somebody's wearing a fucked-up tie and shirt.

I don't want to be in a program all *abochornado* [bumlike]. I probably won't even concentrate, getting dished, like . . . and being looked at like a sucker. Dirty jeans . . . or like old jeans, because I would have to wear jeans, 'cause I only got one slack. Word though! I only got two dress shirts and one of them is missing buttons.

I didn't want to tell you about that because it's like a poor excuse, but that was the only shit I was really thinking about. At the time I just said, "Well, I just don't show up."

And Felipe, I'm a stupid [very] skinny nigga'. So I have to be careful how I dress, otherwise people will think I be on the stem [a crack addict who smokes out of a glass-stem pipe].

Philippe: [nervously] Oh shit. I'm even skinnier than you. People must think I'm a total drug addict.

Primo: Don't worry. You're white.

Obviously, the problem is deeper than not having enough money to buy straight-world clothes. Racism and the other subtle badges of symbolic power are expressed through wardrobes and body language. Ultimately, Primo's biggest problem was that he had no idea of what clothes might be appropriate in the professional, service sector context. Like Caesar, he feared he might appear to be a buffoon on parade on the days when he was trying to dress up. He admitted that the precipitating factor in his decision not to go back to the job training program was when he overheard someone accusing Candy of "looking tacky" after she proudly

inaugurated her new fancy clothes at the first class. As a matter of fact, Primo had thought she had looked elegant in her skintight, yellow jumpsuit when she came over to his apartment to display her new outfit proudly to him and his mother before going to class.

Unionized Travesties: Racism and Racketeering

Isolating oneself in inner-city street culture removes any danger of having to face the humiliations Candy, Caesar, or Primo inevitably confront when they venture out of their social circle to try to find legal employment. At the same time, there is a persistent awareness held by even the bitterest, most alienated of the crack dealers that a unionized job represents a positive, legal alternative to the drug economy. This was especially true for construction work, the single most accessible and relatively abundant, unionized entry-level job in New York City. A job in construction coincides even better than factory work with street culture's definitions of masculinity.¹⁰ Even Caesar rebuked me when I accused him of being too lazy to work in construction. Framed by the Game Room door where he was standing at his lookout position, he puffed out his chest and raised his fists, reminding me of a television advertisement for Captain Planet.

Caesar: Naah man. Fuck you! Construction is good.

Look at my body. I got a body that's good for construction.

Mines' isn't like Primo's. [pointing to Primo, who was serving a customer] He's got a body that's more for shipping and receiving. [distant gunshots]

To my surprise, Caesar admitted to failing in his attempt to become a construction worker before being hired by Primo at the Game Room. The experience had been less humiliating to him than his failure at the advertising agency, Sudler & Hennessey, because it is common knowledge in New York City that the construction industry is a racist preserve for well-paid white workers ensconced in Mafia-controlled unions.¹¹ Since the 1970s, inner-city-based affirmative action organizations have attempted to force local construction sites to hire laborers from their communities. Ironically, they utilize the same strong-arm techniques

pioneered by the old-fashioned Italian Mafia. Men with Caesar's muscular stature and rage-filled disposition are recruited systematically by these affirmative action employment organizations in order to act as violent pickets to intimidate the construction companies and force them to integrate Latinos and African-Americans onto their work sites. The most effective picketers are rewarded with positions as full-time, unionized day laborers at the same construction sites where their strong-arm tactics were successful.

With his hulking bravado and affinity for public displays of violence, Caesar earned one of these rare union jobs after only a week of picketing for one of the more legitimate and famous of these race-busting employment organizations, known as "Harlem Fight-Back." Although brilliantly successful on the picket line, Caesar fell apart when he left the protective cocoon of Harlem Fight-Back's street culture tactics. He found himself all of a sudden confronting the racist stonewalling of his new, exclusively white, union colleagues.

It was good pay. They was paying me fourteen dollars an hour. But I was the only Puerto Rican; they were all like Eye-talians and shit like that. And I never got paid:

What happened was they started jerking me around. I was working in demolition, but everytime I would go to the site the foreman wouldn't know nothing about their hiring me, and they be sending me from one job site to another.

And these big Eye-talian dudes – like forty years old – be asking me [gruffly], "Who send you here?"

And I was like [shrugs his shoulders helplessly].

And they would be [gruffly again], "Who hired you?"

I would tell them who hired me. But my problem was that the main union office didn't send me no papers. And I didn't get no time card or nothing like that. So I was just working wildly.

I would go to the job site and everybody would be there waiting for the bosses to go, "All right now, everybody start working." Then they'd be working, and I just join in the work.

But nobody knew who I was. It was like "Who hired you?" and "Where's your time card?"

So they kept jerking me around. I was stupid. I just never went

back. 'Cause at that time I was smoking, so I said "Fuck this man, they giving me a hard time." And I went off on a mission.

In other words, crack colluded with a racist labor market and with Caesar's personal vulnerabilities to keep him from having to face his structural exclusion from even the most traditional, macho niche of the working-class labor force.

Two subsectors within the unionized construction industry were relatively more open to El Barrio's African-American and Puerto Rican population: building demolition and high-rise window replacement. These particularly dangerous enclaves of the industry abound in New York City's poorest neighborhoods, where they thrive on landlord gentrification schemes and rampant public sector corruption. Most blatantly, in demolition, tough El Barrio high school dropouts, proud of working legally, clear away the hulks of arsoned and abandoned working-class tenements to make room for the construction of new, luxury structures that they, and their families, will never be able to afford. Economists and real estate agents call this gentrification. On the street, I heard it referred to as "bleachification."

The abundant supply of window-replacement jobs is only slightly more subtly the result of the competition over affordable housing in Manhattan. According to New York City's housing regulations, window replacement counts as a capital improvement that landlords are allowed to pass on to their unsuspecting tenants at several times the real cost through strategic — but perfectly legal — bookkeeping. It represents one of the only ways for landlords to bypass New York's strict rent stabilization and family eviction laws, and force poor tenants out of their buildings by raising their rents rapidly. Fringe areas between very wealthy and very poor neighborhoods, like East Harlem's southern border with New York's Silk Stocking Upper East Side around East 96th Street, are precisely the kinds of interstitial zones most vulnerable to these gentrification schemes. Ironically, in El Barrio young men experience as positive their long-term residential displacement from their natal neighborhoods because they are provided in the short term with well-paid construction jobs renovating buildings that will no longer be affordable to the working poor.

The periodic "renovations" of Housing Authority project buildings that are sponsored by organized crime provide another abundant source

of high-altitude window-replacement jobs. Several of the crackhouse habitués, including Little Pete, the manager of the Social Club, participated proudly and unknowingly in these Mafia-controlled window scams. Little Pete's tenure replacing the several thousand windows on the housing project buildings opposite the Game Room was cut short when a pane fell on his head, lodging glass splinters in his left eye. He was forced to apply for indigent medical aid at Metropolitan Hospital, East Harlem's public municipal facility, because his subcontractor had never paid any medical insurance or workers' compensation policies. Worse yet, the hospital social worker's investigation revealed that Little Pete's subcontractor had hired him illegally through an arrangement with a corrupt union official that allowed them to collect the full union wage of \$18 for each hour worked by Little Pete at \$10. Little Pete had been so proud of earning \$10 an hour, it had never occurred to him that his labor could be valued at \$18 according to union regulation.¹²

The New-Immigrant Alternative

Despite these consistently negative experiences on the fringes of the unionized labor market, everyone acknowledged that union employment was the ideal. "I gotta find a union job" was one of Primo's most common refrains during his intermittent periods of concerted job search. In fact, for a brief two-month period he fell prey to the illusion that he had found a unionized position with a nighttime janitorial services company that cleaned hotel conference rooms and theaters in Times Square. At first, despite his \$6.50-an-hour starting wage, Primo was thrilled. He confided to me that he felt terrific, "like a normal working nigga"; although he did note, "You know the weird thing? They're all fuckin' immigrants there except for the bosses." He also complained that the company refused to pay them overtime; nevertheless, he accepted their explanation that hotel management insisted the workers leave the premises before the guests awoke: "I guess they don't want to be seeing scum like us around. So we try to bust out a lotta work from eleven [p.m.] to six-thirty [a.m.]." He disliked the "bald, white Jewish boss" for berating them everytime he inspected their work, but he was impressed by the unionized workers on his shift who militantly cursed the "bald white guy" back. After his second biweekly paycheck he noticed that several nights' worth of work were missing and that none of the native-born Americans

were lasting through the two-and-a-half-month probation period that all workers had to pass before being allowed to join the union.

Sure enough, when Primo was two weeks short of qualifying for union tenure, he was laid off.

Primo: I figured it was gonna happen 'cause I was just working there for two or three months. So I'm the one at the most risk to get laid off, because of that wack union business. Besides you don't get no Blue Cross/Blue Shield at that job, and they mess up your money.

The older guys working there for years, they told me, "You don't get no union on this job. By the time you're three months here, they'll lay you off. Watch it."

They still owe me hours. That job is wack. Its gonna be all wetbacks, Jamaicans and Central Americans, soon.

Caesar was particularly enraged by Primo's accounts of management's union-busting. Nevertheless, both he and Primo succumbed to a classic racist, divide-and-conquer logic. They channeled their anger over their structural vulnerability within management-labor confrontations into scapegoating the new immigrants entering New York City's low-wage labor market, and in this process, further crushed their own dreams of ever having access to well-paid unionized jobs.

Caesar: Mexicans get jerked in these places man. They not getting paid well, and they takin' all the jobs. You know what I'm saying? They cheap labor.

People will hire Mexicans before they hire a white man, or a Puerto Rican, because they know they could jerk them more.

Primo: They getting paid like, two or three dollars an hour in a job that I coulda had.

Caesar: That gets me mad too man!

Primo: They take up jobs that other people could have that are citizens of the United States.

Caesar: 'Cause we belong to America.

Primo: And then I could probably get paid the right amount — five, six, or eight dollars.

Caesar: And Mexicans be bringing a lotta partners with them. They be having buildings full of Mexicans now.

Primo: The building on 116th is packed with Mexicans boy.

Caesar: This whole block is getting to be fuckin' full of a lotta different types of races. And they be like a whole bunch of them living all crazy-like in one crib.

Especially the Africans — those people look dirty to me.

Primo: They treat you like shit, and they live better than us.

Caesar: They look like unclean people for some reason.

Philippe: Aw, come on!

Caesar: They really black. Like real dark black. They look dirty to me. They not the same kind of blacks as the Americans that be around here. They're like a real hard-core suntan black.

Primo: And then there's the Dominicans.

Philippe: Man! You guys should read my book¹³ about how stupid it is for poor people to be racist against each other. Let me go get it and read out loud — It's about a plantation in Costa Rica where blacks and Latinos be riffin' at each other. The companies love it; they just laugh all the way to the bank.

Caesar: [ignoring my comment] It's like Dominicans who are most fucked up. They come in and they either sell drugs or buy a store.

I hate Dominicans the most, man.

In a classic replay of the historical process that brought their parents and grandparents to El Barrio — but with the roles reversed — Primo, Caesar, and virtually everyone in the Game Room entourage detested the new immigrants moving into their neighborhood. During the last years of my fieldwork this expressed itself in random predatory violence against the rural Mexicans who were arriving in increasing numbers and moving into the most decrepit tenements on the worst drug-copping corners surrounding us. Several of the Game Room habitués — including Nestor, a seller directly employed by Ray to occasionally replace Primo and Caesar — were arrested for mugging, stabbing, and, in one fatal case, shooting their new Mexican neighbors.

Three or four decades earlier, it was Italian-Americans who were lashing out at Puerto Ricans whom they accused of "stealing" their

factory jobs and "invading" their neighborhood. The same third world desperate poverty faced by Mexicans in the 1990s was the driving force rendering new-immigrant Puerto Ricans more "exploitable" in the 1940s and 1950s than the progeny of the previous immigrant group, New York-born Italians. This is clearly expressed, for example, in Primo's mother's childhood memories of her rural youth.

Primo's mother: [in Spanish] I loved my life in Puerto Rico. We always ate, because my father always had work, and in those days the custom was to have a garden in your patio to grow food and everything that you ate.

We only ate meat on Sundays, because everything was cultivated on the same little parcel of land. From there we got our eggplant, our beans, our cilantro, our . . . [lists several more traditional Puerto Rican subsistence vegetables and herbs] That way we saved our money.

We didn't have a refrigerator, so we ate *bacalao* [salted codfish], which can stay outside, and a meat that they call *carne de vieja* [shredded beef], and sardines from a can.

But thanks to God, we never felt hunger. My mother made a lot of cornflour. And to save money, whenever there were beans left over, she would strain them; mash them; make a little soup; and add a little cornflour. So we were never hungry.

In the 1950s, Leonard Covello, the Italian-American principal of El Barrio's public high school, was dismayed over the racism that his neighbors directed against people like Primo's mother. In his autobiography he reports an argument he had with a group of Italian-American men on an El Barrio street corner:

[Man on street corner] They're not like us. We're American. We eat meat at least three times a week. What do they eat? Beans!

[High school principal] What do you think your parents ate when they came to America? . . . *Pasta e fasul* . . . Beans and macaroni — and don't forget it. Don't forget that other people used to say the same things about your mothers and fathers that you now say about the Puerto Ricans.¹⁴

The violence and racist tensions of the 1990s between young, unemployed New York-born Puerto Ricans and the new immigrants "invading" their neighborhoods and labor markets is the human underside to the latest phase in the restructuring of New York's economy. The real value of the minimum wage declined by one-third during the 1980s at the same time that the federal government decreased by more than 50 percent its proportional contribution to New York City's budget. Under normal conditions this would precipitate a crisis in the reproduction of the entry-level labor force.¹⁵ Instead, new immigrants provide a fresh source of below-subsistence-cost workers tolerant of exploitative labor conditions. Specifically, in East Harlem the majority of the new immigrants are Mexicans from the rural states of Puebla and Guerrero. The poverty of their natal villages makes them a highly disciplined, inexpensive workforce capable of fulfilling the enormous needs that well-paid FIRE sector executives have for personal services: housekeepers, office cleaners, delivery personnel, boutique attendants, restaurant workers.¹⁶ Furthermore, their impoverished rural backgrounds where running water and electricity are considered a luxury make them tolerant of the crushing public sector breakdown endemic to U.S. inner cities. Native-born New Yorkers of any ethnicity are simply not exploitable enough to compete with rural new immigrants for low-wage menial jobs.

In addition to the material fact of tolerating lower standards of living and of accepting more exploitative working conditions, new-immigrant Mexicans experience racism and subordination at work in a very different manner from Puerto Ricans or African-Americans. Their sense of self-respect does not articulate as closely with the ethnic hierarchies and definitions of self-worth constructed by native-born North Americans. Many of the subtler expressions of racism and disrespect that are routinely directed against Latinos in New York are simply irrelevant to them. Of course, this partial insulation from "gettin' dissed" by other ethnic groups will decrease with time as new-immigrant Mexicans develop greater personal and emotional stakes in local society, and as a second generation of New York-born Mexicans comes of age. Presumably, similar dynamics mediated by different cultural and economic parameters occur among undocumented new-immigrant Asians in lower Manhattan, Dominicans on the Upper West Side, and West Indians in Brooklyn.¹⁷

The Bicultural Alternative: Upward Mobility or Betrayal

Given the structural dynamic of ethnic succession by new immigrants at the lowest echelons of New York's labor force, the primary hope for upward mobility among New York-born Puerto Ricans lies in the expanding FIRE sector's need for office support workers — mail room clerks, photocopiers, and receptionists. Not only is this one of the fastest-growing subsectors of the city's economy, it also has the greatest potential for upward mobility as messengers get promoted to clerks, who get promoted to administrative assistants, and so on. Of course, these are also precisely the kinds of jobs that require subservient behavior anathema to street culture.

As noted earlier, success in the FIRE service sector requires an inner-city office worker to be bicultural: in other words, to play politely by "the white woman's rules" downtown only to come home and revert to street culture within the safety of a tenement or housing project at night. Thousands of East Harlem residents manage to balance their identities on this precarious tightrope. Often, when they are successful, their more marginally employed or unemployed neighbors and childhood friends accuse them of ethnic betrayal and internalized racism.

I collected several righteous condemnations by Game Room habitués of their successfully employed neighbors who work downtown and adapt to high-rise office culture. Leroy, another cousin of Caesar's, who ran his own private crack operation, was especially adamant on the subject.

Leroy: When you see someone go downtown and get a good job, if they be Puerto Rican, you see them fix up their hair and put some contact lens in their eyes. Then they fit in. And they do it! I seen it.

They turnovers. They people who wanna be white. Man, if you call them in Spanish, it wind up a problem.

I mean like, take the name Pedro — I'm just telling you this as an example — Pedro be saying, [imitating a white nasal accent] "My name is Peter."

Where do you get Peter from Pedro?

Just watch how Spanish people fix up their hair. When they get nice jobs like that, all of a sudden, you know, they start talking proper.

The bicultural alternative is not an option for Leroy, whose black skin and tough street demeanor disqualify him from credibility in a high-rise office corridor. I learned later that part of his articulate anger on the night I tape-recorded his denunciation of "turnovers" was the result of his most recent foray into office work. He had just quit a "nickel-and-dime messenger job downtown" (in order to return to crack dealing full time in his project stairway) shortly after a white woman fled from him shrieking down the hallway of a high-rise office building. Leroy and the terrified woman had ridden the elevator together and coincidentally Leroy had stepped off on the same floor as she did, to make a delivery. Worse yet, Leroy had been trying to act like a debonair male when the woman fled from him. He suspected the contradiction between his inadequate appearance and his chivalric intentions was responsible for the woman's terror:

Leroy: You know how you let a woman go off the elevator first? Well that's what I did to her, but I may have looked a little shabby on the ends. Sometime my hair not combed, you know; so I could look a little sloppy to her, maybe, when I let her off first.

What Leroy did not quite admit until I probed further is that he too had been intimidated by the lone white woman. He had been so disoriented by her taboo, unsupervised proximity that he had forgotten to press the elevator button when he originally stepped into the elevator with her:

Leroy: She went in the elevator first, but then she just waits there to see what floor I press.

She's playing like she don't know what floor she wants to go to, because she wants to wait for me to press my floor. And I'm standing there, and I forgot to press the button.

I'm thinking about something else — I don't know what was the matter with me. And she's thinking like, "He's not pressing the button; I guess he's following me!"

Leroy struggles to understand the terror his mere presence inspires in whites:

Leroy: It's happened before. I mean after a while you become immune to it.

Well, when it first happens, it like bugs you, "That's messed up. How they just judge you?" You know, they be thinking, "Guys like that, they're a lot of dark guys running around." It's like crazy.

But I understand a lot of them. How should I say it? A lot of white people . . . [looking nervously at me] I mean Caucasian people — [flustered, putting his hand gently on my shoulder] If I say white, don't get offended because there are some white people who live in this neighborhood.

But those other white people they never even experienced black people. They come from wealthy neighborhoods, and the schools they go to . . . no black kids there. The college they go to . . . no black kids there. And then they come to office buildings, and they just start seeing us.

And you know, we don't have the best jobs. You know, how it is. I call them nickel-and-dime jobs. You know, we are not always as well adjusted or as well dressed.

Sometime I come in a little sloppy. So automatically they think something wrong with you. Or you know, they think you out to rob them or something. So I like, . . . I don't pay it no mind. Sometime it irks me. Like, you know, it clicks my mind. Makes me want to write. I always write it down.

Sometime I write down the incident, what happened. I try to make a rhyme [rap lyrics] out of it.

Of course, as a crack dealer Leroy no longer has to confront this kind of confusing class and racial humiliation.

I pursued this issue with another, older cousin of Caesar's — one who had actually "made it" in the legal economy. He maintained a stable white-collar job in an insurance agency and had moved his family to the suburbs. His experience was particularly interesting as he had grown up in the neighborhood and had passed through a phase of heroin addiction. He still maintained acquaintanceships with some of his old street friends. At first he assured me that his escape from street culture had not necessitated any ethnic compromise. He saw it as part of a religious conversion. He and his family were devout Jehovah's Witnesses. At the

same time, he did admit he had to hide the extent of his economic success when he returned to visit friends and family in El Barrio.

Caesar's cousin: Half of my friends died: killings, overdose. But I stay in touch with the ones who are still alive. As a matter of fact, I just seen one tonight. He's still on methadone.

My friends though, they don't see me as looking down on them, because I don't ever do that. They really don't know how I really live. They know I "peddle insurance," but I don't get heavy about it with them. It might make them feel uncomfortable. I never do that to them. So they don't see me as someone who's betrayed.

The tightrope of class and ethnicity is not quite as easy to balance in his new upwardly mobile world governed by a deeply institutionalized racism. The solution in his case has been to internalize the legitimacy of apartheid in the United States.

Caesar's cousin: My kids' future is much brighter than mines' ever was. We live in a suburban situation. As a matter of fact, we may be one of the three Hispanic families in that general area.

When I jog down the neighborhood, people get scared; people get nervous about me. It's not a problem for me, because I have self-confidence. I don't worry about it. It doesn't faze me at all.

Every once in a while, I used to get a crank call in the house, saying, you know, "Hey spic," you know, "spic" and other stuff, but I don't worry about that. [he giggles]

In a sense, I've learned to be in their shoes. You see what I mean? Because I've seen what minorities as a group can do to a neighborhood. I've seen great neighborhoods go down. So I step into their shoes and I understand; I've learned how to be sympathetic. I understand their thinking.

Caesar and Primo are not capable of such sympathy and understanding; instead, they take refuge in the underground economy and celebrate street culture.