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Confronting Anthropology, Education, and Inner-City Apartheid

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INNER-CITY EXPERIENCES of social marginalization are enmeshed in ideological murk. Politicians, the media, the general public, and even inner-city residents themselves often rely on blame-the-victim, racialized explanations for the extraordinary concentrations of poverty at the cores of all of the largest, wealthiest cities in the United States. Academics divide into atheoretical camps that pit liberal glorifications of the poor as structural victims against conservative vilifications of criminal black men, valueless families, and promiscuous welfare-bred teenagers. Whether driven by a liberal humanistic sympathy for the poor or by a vindictive celebration of concentrated wealth, notions of inner-city social organization are, for the most part, elitist projections of class- and race-biased fantasies.

Part of the problem is logistical: class segregation and racial isolation is so cemented into the fabric of U.S. society that outsiders cannot access the daily lives of the very poor. Another reason for the murk lies in the overwhelming and contradictory nature of extreme urban poverty in the land of plenty. The centrality of external structures in constraining social misery rooted in histories of politics, economics, and cultural domination hides behind the hypervisibility of the individual propagation of terror and violence and its daily self-administration by inner-city residents against their neighbors and themselves.

Ethnography in the Inner City

At first sight ethnography, because it requires cross-class and cross-cultural interaction, offers an exciting venue for exploring social marginalization and racism. In practice, however, there are few substantive ethnographies of inner-city street life. College-educated intellectuals are usually too elitist or too frightened to be capable of treating unemployed, drug-addicted, violent criminals with the respect and humanity that ethnographic methods require for meaningful dialogue to occur. Not surprisingly, by far the most insightful portrayals of social marginalization come from the autobi-

ographies of individuals from the inner city who survive street life, become upwardly mobile, and gain access to the print media, film, or video. This is certainly the case with the Puerto Rican diaspora in New York City. Entire literary genres—Nuyorican autobiography, poetry, and fiction—have emerged, to portray the resistance and pathos of second-generation immigrants in the inner city.¹ Perhaps not coincidentally, postmodern theorists and cultural critics in the 1990s have explored fiction, self-representation, and dialogic practice in other social arenas as ways of subverting cultural anthropology's colonizing discourses (Maranhão 1990; Visweswaran 1994). In the 1980s, dialogue was offered as an alternative to the omniscient totalizing monologues of traditional ethnographies (Page 1988; Tedlock 1983).

The experience of Puerto Ricans in social science literature is a case in point for illustrating the need to question grand narratives and to deconstruct ethnographic authority.² Sometimes referred to as "the most researched but least understood people in the United States" (G. Lewis 1963, cited in C. Rodriguez 1995), Puerto Ricans have been the subject of bitter polemics in social science research on urban poverty. Significantly, it is at the intersection of ethnography and literature that New York-based Puerto Ricans have been subjected to their most notorious public representation as the backdrop for the "culture of poverty" theory developed by Oscar Lewis (1966) in *La Vida*. A literary rendition of thousands of pages of transcriptions of life history interviews with an extended family of Puerto Ricans whose poverty forced them to migrate to New York City, Lewis's analysis focuses on the role of family pathology and individual self-destruction to explain the desperate living conditions of second-generation Puerto Rican rural-to-urban migrants. Despite Lewis's social democratic political orientation and his personal sympathy for the plight of the poor, his book is usually interpreted by North American readers as a blame-the-victim, inferiorizing narrative.³

Critical Ethnographies of Education

The academic polemics of the 1970s against Lewis's decontextualized fixation on individual and family pathology in the Puerto Rican diaspora have dissuaded anthropologists from centering ethnographies around the politically and emotionally charged topic of inner-city poverty. The rise of postmodernist perspectives, with their proliferation of deconstructionist critiques, has provided greater sophistication to iconoclastic debunkings of inferiorizing narratives. Unfortunately, however, the often playfully aesthetic emphasis on text and the ironic logic of evoking partial truths has removed most of these ethnographies from political, or even social, engagement. The "death of ethnography" and the emphasis on fragmented social realities or on interpreting culture as text make it difficult to prioritize experiences of injustice and oppression. Postmodernists treat those of us who believe a primary goal of anthropology should be to identify the structuring of inequality—and pain—across race, class, gender, sexuality, and other power-ridden categories as naive totalizers. Even the most explicitly subversive postmodernist approaches in cultural studies allow scholars to retreat with political righteousness to texts, images, art, architecture, and discourses that they can access without leaving the safe white public space of campus libraries, colonial archives, museums, cyberspace, theaters, popular media, and suburban highway vistas. Their research subject and focus shields them from having to sustain direct and uncomfortable contact with human beings experiencing social misery across the violent, apartheidlike divides of the United States. Their politics, like their subjects, remain textual, removed from drug addicts, street criminals, angry youths, or any other flesh-and-blood embodiments of social injustice.

Despite the exoticizing risks inherent to hands-on ethnographic research, I am convinced that anthropologists should be able to generate a critical debate around social suffering in urban America because of their participant-observation methods. The *de facto* urban apartheid that prevents intellectuals from confronting social misery in U.S. cities can be bridged when ethnographers engage in long-term vulnerable dialogues with participants in the inner city's underground economy and in its vibrant but violent street culture. This was the case with ethnographers in education departments during the 1970s and 1980s who began addressing the taboo issues of the agency of self-destruction in the context of extreme social marginalization and segregation (see Anderson 1989). Perhaps educators pioneered this research because schools represent a relatively safe niche for intellectuals to see and talk to the socially marginal. In fact, the

close institutionalized quarters of school buildings oblige educators to come face-to-face with lumpen youth for prolonged periods of time whether they want to or not. The results of such classroom dialogues often reproduce hegemonic soliloquies and inferiorizing projections. Nevertheless, on the margins of mainstream pedagogical research—precisely at that point where anthropology intersects with sociology via ethnographic methods—critiques of class, racial, and gender oppression in the United States have begun to bud.

It is impossible to group these "critical ethnographies" of education into any single theoretical school as they often critique one another as much as the educational institutions that they study (Devine in press; Ellsworth 1989). Nevertheless, most school ethnographers in the 1970s and 1980s owed much of their critical perspective to some version of Freirian neo-Marxism or to Bourdieu's (1977) theory of social reproduction, especially his concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and symbolic violence. The earlier analyses of schools tended toward material reductionism (Bowles and Gintis 1976), but a seminal study by Paul Willis (1977) of working-class schoolboys in England set a precedent by arguing that a youth culture of resistance contradictorily buttresses society's status quo (see also Foley 1990 and MacLeod 1987). Culture, gender, and agency, consequently, emerged as the central concerns of critical educational theorists in the 1980s (Giroux 1988). The particular contribution of U.S.-based education ethnographies has been to emphasize the importance of immigration, racism, and sexism in school culture (Fordham 1993; Gibson and Ogbu 1991). Once again, the rise of postmodern approaches and cultural criticism has allowed education ethnographers to draw from such diverse, often contradictory, theoretical strands as liberation theology, Foucault, Bakhtin, and Benjamin (Devine in press; Lucas 1995).

A major flaw of most educational ethnographies is their glamorization of adolescent oppositional styles as protopolitical resistance. While they restore agency to social structural victims and note how street cultures of resistance contradictorily shape the oppression and destruction of vulnerable youths and their surrounding communities, they also sanitize painful realities. Youthful street culture may offer an alternative space for resisting exploitation and for subverting the ideological insults and hierarchies of mainstream society, but it is also the site where drugs are purveyed, boys kill one another, infants are battered, and young women are gang-raped.⁴ At the same time that street culture represents a creative response to exclusion by creating new forums for dignity, it also guarantees exclusion by requiring its participants to be semiliterate, expressively aggressive, unexploitable,

and enmeshed in substance abuse and violence (Bourgois 1995).

Perhaps the greatest weakness of education ethnographies, however, remains their arbitrary focus on a single institution—the school—and worse yet, the classroom within the school. Safely denouncing the hidden curricula of repressive pedagogies, most of the radical ethnographers fail to venture into hallways, playgrounds, or the surrounding streets, tenements, and housing projects. Once again, part of the problem is rooted in the failure of privileged intellectuals to confront street culture on its own terms. It is as if university-trained researchers crave the protective cocoon of classrooms. Apparently, they have internalized the class- and culture-based apartheid logics of their society and they succumb to the physical fear and emotional insecurity of the inner-city street by fleeing to safer institutional confines where white public space is still dominant.

School ethnographies miss the prime movers of street culture: dropouts. This is an especially grave omission in the case of Puerto Rican youth in New York City, where over one-half of Puerto Rican youth never graduate from high school (ASPIRA 1989). For example, during the almost four years (late 1980s through the early 1990s) that I lived on a drug-infested block in East Harlem, befriending crack dealers, I met only one male high school graduate living on my street. The other two dozen or so street-level crack dealers whose childhood school reminiscences I tape-recorded were all precocious dropouts—some never finished sixth grade.

Nevertheless, schools remain the most important state institution for mediating mainstream society's relationship to inner-city children. My crack-house conversations about past school experiences immediately revealed that street-bound dropouts learn a great deal at school—but almost none of it in the classroom. Despite the only marginal impact of formal pedagogy in the youthful socialization of dropouts, their aborted school experiences play a central role in shaping their future careers in the underground economy as drug peddlers, muggers, armed robbers, and single mothers. Precocious participants in street culture are able to hone, at the expense of their classmates, the crucial survival skills they need to excel on the street, whether those skills be fistfighting, verbal jousting, gang rape, or strategic cruelty. I never set foot inside a school or interviewed either teachers or administrators, and only very rarely encountered formally enrolled students. Nevertheless I consider my crack dealer conversations to be a school ethnography.

Through editing and contextualizing four and a half years' worth of tape-recorded conversations with crack dealers, I hope to catch some of the humbling

cacophony that occurs when anthropology confronts the vexing human quandaries of urban apartheid. By exploring my emotional relationships with the drug users and sellers who became my friends and enemies, I hope to capture some of the contradictory agency that accompanies structural oppression. Unlike mainstream deconstructionists, the "betwixt-and-between" of our voices sounds more to me like the agony that U.S. society imposes on its most marginal poor youths of color than the creativity of heteroglossic dialogues. I have reconstructed these conversations, consequently, to portray the "everyday violence" (Scheper-Hughes 1992) of class, ethnicity, gender, and ability in the hope of "facing power" (Wolf 1990) and, most importantly, denouncing it.

Kindergarten Delinquencies: Confronting Symbolic Violence

The very first school memories of the crack dealers in my social network were negative. This was certainly the case with Primo, the manager of the crack house located next to the tenement where I lived, who became my closest friend during my residence in East Harlem:

I hated school. I just hated it. I used to fuck up all the time in school. Never in my life did I do homework. Never!

The racial denigration of Puerto Rican rural working-class culture in New York City affects the most intimate relationships in a toddler's life as preschoolers distance themselves from their parents' vulnerable ethnicity and class by striving to identify with the dominant culture engulfing them. Following the insights of the French Algerian sociologist, Abdelmalek Sayad (1991: ch. 7), the first delinquency of second-generation immigrants in a colonial society is to refuse to speak their maternal tongue. When the child begins school, this cultural delinquency is compounded and perhaps inverted when he or she fails to comply with institutional modes of interaction. If forms of cultural expression are the basis for the symbolic capital structuring power in any given society, then one can understand from the perspective of a new immigrant mother and her second-generation child the trauma of first contact with the public school system.

In his kindergarten homeroom, Primo inherited the instantaneous onus of his mother's identities: rural former plantation worker and, now, inner-city sweatshop employee. Her functional illiteracy and her inability to communicate with the educational bureaucracy made Primo appear problematic to his teachers. Perhaps right away he had to protect himself by resisting his teachers lest they unconsciously insult or hurt

him when he made the mistake of trying—but inevitably failing—to please them. No precocious, healthy five- or six-year-olds can bear to witness the instantaneous transformation of their mothers—the authority figures in their lives—into intimidated objects of ridicule. Worse yet, over the next few years, this hostile, alien institution seizes control of even the most intimate dimensions of one's daily life, mediating a mother's caresses, criticisms, or beatings. Contradictorily, therefore, despite his anxious mother's admonishments that he respect his teacher and do well in school, success in the classroom would have betrayed Primo's love for his mother. To have obeyed his teacher and to have liked school would have required Primo to internalize society's disrespect for his mother.

Imagine how Primo must have looked to his teachers by second grade:

I never wanted to do nothing in class. I never raised my hand. I would just sit there. . . . I used to wanta really hide. I was really a shy kid, like, sitting in the back of the class and like, "Leave me alone." . . . So I started drawing—my whole table was all decorated—like graffiti. . . . Sometimes I used to feel fucked up and just started making noises. They'd throw me out of class.

By embracing street culture, Primo was lashing back at the symbolic violence of his elementary school that flailed him for his accent, clothing, body language, play style, and attention spans. He celebrated his prowess in the alternative forums for dignity that the street offers, and he thereby exacerbated any chance he might have had to be able to function effectively outside of the inner city's underground economy:

I use to curse the shit out of my teachers when they dished me. I was *malo*—*malo malo*. . . . Like if the teacher said, "Shut up!" or something. I'd say, "Fuck you asshole!" And I was just a little nigga' back then—maybe seven or eight years old, like my son, Junior.

The oppositional skills that Primo learned at school further poisoned his vulnerable relationship with his mother by upsetting the generational household hierarchies imported from rural Puerto Rico. Primo's early grade school literacy and his understanding of educational conventions allowed him to manipulate his mother and betray her trust. Powerless before this subversion of the channels of mother-child authority, Primo's mother lashed back at him with one of the only weapons available to an illiterate immigrant forced to work long hours in garment district sweatshops: beatings, distrust, and anger.

My whole first-grade notebook was marked red. But I never used to tell her nothing so that she would sign it. . . . Then the teachers told her about the red, and she went like, "AAAAGGGH!" [flailing both arms in rage]. . . . So then

when they wrote her a letter about my homeworks that she was supposed to sign, I just traced her signature right over where it was supposed to be.

Twenty years later, in traditional *jibaro* style, Primo urges his nine-year-old son to do well in school and to obey his teachers; but Junior has already flunked second grade once.

Violent Interfaces: Family, Institutional, and Personal

As the manager of a reasonably efficient crack house, Primo is respected on the street for controlling his violence and being appropriately firm but flexible. In contrast, his lookout, Caesar, is feared and mistrusted because of his repeated bursts of gratuitous violence and cruelty. While this provides him with credibility as a lookout and a bodyguard, it also makes most people question his sanity—but not enough to ostracize him.

Caesar's barely controlled rage and precipitous violence emerged early in his school career. While Primo was making disruptive noises, cursing teachers, or defacing his desk, Caesar was opposing school so organically that it expressed itself in his very body (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:149):

The teachers used to hate me. They used to say, "He's big and mean." . . . I was wild. I was a delinquent [laughing].

As with Primo, a crucial nexus in his alienation from school was the always tense triangular prism: parent-child-homeroom teacher. Like Primo, Caesar is the son of a woman who immigrated as a teenager, but Caesar's mother came from an urban shantytown rather than a rural plantation village and she was more literate and acculturated. This translated into even more violent personal disruptions in her life: serial teenage pregnancies with different men, heroin addiction, and criminality, hence the personal brutalities punctuating Caesar's life and his siblings'. His mother was serving 25 years for murder; his older sister was fatally stabbed 17 times in their housing project stairway; and his younger brother was serving a five-year sentence in a federal penitentiary for selling automatic weapons to undercover agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. The disarray and vulnerability of Caesar's family translated into institutional dysfunction in his educational career as he was moved from one extended family member to another:

I don't even remember how many times I changed school. Six, seven, eight times, ten times. . . . The first move was to my cousins' in Connecticut, 'cause I was getting into too much trouble in New York. And from there, I went to Chicago . . . but then I was in trouble with the law. . . . You

gotta wait a long time for papers, each time you move, so when I came back to New York, I just didn't go back to school; I went to work.

It is essential for youths to cultivate violent personas when they are repeatedly shifted from one school to another if they are to survive physically, let alone maintain their sense of personal dignity. Caesar's primary memories of formal education revolve around the violence that organized his school days:

Primo: I used to fight so wild that they wouldn't bother me for a while. I would go real crazy every time I would fight. . . . Whenever I came to a new school, the first days, all the older niggas would wanta like initiate you. And they be in the hallway calling out, [eerily] "Roookieees" [bumping into me and almost knocking me over]. . . . But the first nigga' that slapped me on the back of my neck [slapping me] . . . I break his head [lifting me up in the air] . . . 'cause I was scared.

Caesar: I always got into fights. Even if I lost, I always started fights [punching me and Caesar simultaneously].

Philippe: You're not going to believe this, but I've never punched anyone in my whole life.

Caesar: [nervous laughter] Wha'?! Felipe! Why you want to let people think you're pussy?

Primo: [interrupting] In my school, everybody used to get bullied; but nobody fucked with me because I used to pick up a chair, or pencil, or something, and fuck them up. . . . That let me relax more.

Caesar: Yeah, I mean, Felipe, you rich. You didn't have to handle this shit, but me and homeboy [pointing to Primo], we was all jumpin'. . . . It was worser in Connecticut, because there it was like a war over there: blacks against Puerto Ricans.

Despite a generally triumphal celebration of street culture's violence, Caesar did acknowledge his ultimate institutional vulnerability.

My only problem was when I was sent to reform school upstate. There, all the kids would get beat down well by the counselors. . . . I was getting my ass kicked. Niggas has me mopping floors for them and shit.

I collected several alternative, complementary accounts of Caesar's reform school experience from a former classmate, named Eddie, who describes himself as having been "a disturbed little nigga' too." By seven years of age, Eddie had already tried to commit suicide; at nine, he attempted to throw himself out of a third-floor school window when a teacher "roughed [him] up for not paying attention in class." Like Caesar's mother, Eddie's mother was abandoned by her alcoholic husband, "a stingy, cheap, non-giving, just-making-babies-type person." She also used heroin, and "had to split the family up among other relatives." Unlike Caesar, Eddie was able to admit, "I missed my mom. I used to cry every day; be a big sucker. I was thinking suicide." The school authorities interpreted

Eddie's paralyzed depression over being abandoned by his mother as a violation of classroom discipline. They sent him to reform school where he befriended Caesar. Eddie recalled:

They told me, "You not gonna be seeing your mom, 'cause you need that seclusion." I was in the treatment ward. I had to get separated for a while. I missed my mom. I used to cry every day; be a big sucker.

Eddie bonded so closely with Caesar—"We be watching each other's backs"—that despite working legally as a New York City bus driver and abstaining from all substance abuse (even beer) he maintains a close friendship with him.

Eddie's uncharacteristically emotional portrayal of how the trauma of his preadolescent family life meshed with institutionalized violence in the public school system encouraged me to delve deeper into Caesar's home life during these same tender childhood years. At first, Caesar simply denied any youthful vulnerability to child abuse. But as I looked closely at our conversations spanning several years of intense interaction in the crack house and on the street, the terrors and anxieties of his youth emerged in classic battered-child rationalizations sandwiched by casual dialogue. In different conversations, Caesar jumps from statements such as "My grandmother never hit me. I was like a God. My grandmother is my mom's. She loves me" to "I was bad though, I deserved to have been hit a lot of the time. She had to beat me with wires, but it didn't hurt, man" or "I liked to get hurt. I mean I was always looking forward to getting beat down by 'Buela." In one case, he even recollected how she threw a knife at him.

It cut me. Right here on my chest. I remember the knife went *wsshhht!* If I wouldn't have weaved, I probably would've been jiggled a little bit. . . . It was 'cause I was being real bad.

He grew up in terror of his closest nurturers:

I seen my mother throw one of these black ladies that had attacked her through a store window. That made me nervous. I wouldn't do nothing around her. . . . I didn't mess with 'Buela much either for a long time after that knife shit happened.

Agents of Terror Confined to Spaces of Marginality

Caesar's family uproars and his personal psychological trauma articulated with his inner-city schools to make him an agent of personal terror and institutional decay from the perspective of his teachers and fellow students. To explore this personal, institutional, and structural quagmire I often persuaded the crack

dealers, and their entourage, to walk over to their former junior high school after their shift at the crackhouse was over at midnight. Lounging in the shadows of flickering street lamps illuminating the solid concrete playground of the school that they had either been expelled from or dropped out of some dozen years earlier, we drank beer and they sniffed cocaine while I tape-recorded the eager reminiscences that the setting evoked.

Their school's "recreation yard" is encased on all sides by several thousand square feet of solid cement walls. Artists from all the inner-city neighborhoods of New York City have converted this Alcatraz-like prison ambience into the self-styled Graffiti Hall of Fame. As if to drill home the cultural irony of infrastructural apartheid in the urban United States, their extraordinary blaze of aerosol spray paint is purposefully visible to the passengers on a suburban commuter train that whisks thousands of New York City's highest paid finance, insurance, and real estate executives through the heart of El Barrio on the way to their suburban homes set in some of the wealthiest census tracts in the United States.

Our expressively cruel midnight conversations in the Graffiti Hall of Fame junior high school playground could not have contrasted more sharply with the hope, beauty, and cultural critique of the spray-painted walls surrounding us. I was often emotionally overwhelmed by our gleeful celebration of brutality:

Caesar: Me and this other kid named Toto—he was crazy—we used to come to school to fuck up Special-Ed niggas.

Jaycee (Primo's girlfriend): [interrupting] *Lo mataron.* Toto's dead now. I heard they killed him.

Caesar: [nodding at Jaycee] We kick their asses; because they had the retarded here, and the ones that used to walk like this [scraping his toes, inflecting his knees and pronating his arms to imitate someone with hypertonic cerebral palsy]. We used to beat the shit out of them. We used to hurt them, because we didn't like them. . . . There was this one little kid named Lucas that used to walk *fucked up* [exaggerating his hypertonia], who we used to love to kick the shit out of [Primo and Jaycee giggle]. . . . Everybody used to come in the morning, see him, and smack him, like *paaa! Asi!* [hitting me hard on the back of the head]. Real crazy! [In my face] We was really mean to that kid, Felipe. . . . One day, we had a rope and we pretended that we were going to hang him in the gym. We pull't him up a little bit, but then we dropped him when he started coughing. . . . Another time, we stole a rubber hammer from the science class, and we hammered his head.

Primo: [concerned by my eyes welling with tears] *Cayate!* You was fuckin' dumb Caesar!

Caesar: [also looking at me with surprise and confusion] We kicked his ass so hard around that he started walking normal, and he started being in the posse after awhile.

Primo: [perhaps remembering that my baby boy had just been diagnosed with cerebral palsy] He . . . got . . . he got . . . [putting his arm around my shoulder] he got initiated, Felipe!

My own son has cerebral palsy, and on occasion I have had to intervene when tough street kids take advantage of his physical vulnerability. More painfully, I see and feel in my own son the tears and terror Caesar's victim must have shed on the playground, in the gym, and at home. Quite frankly, I have developed a profound dislike for Caesar, and retrospectively I realize this has been helpful for my analysis of social suffering in the inner city.

Philippe: [fighting back tears, clearing my throat, and suppressing my rage against Caesar] Wha' . . . what happened to him?

Caesar: [confused by my repressed emotions] He walked a little bit fucked up [scraping his toes delicately], but not that bad. He started smoking cheeba [marijuana] and shit . . . getting girls. [hugging me around my shoulders] The nigga' even took my girl. . . . Felipe! Whata' matter man? Why you bugging? Here, have some more beer.

Emotional Ethnography: Confronting Cultural Relativism

Even as I edit this particular late-night schoolyard conversation for publication almost six years after tape-recording it, I still feel anger against Caesar and pain for his victims. At the time of the interview, of course, my rage and grief was much stronger. Only three months previously I had been told by a doctor that my 11-month-old son had cerebral palsy, might never walk, and might also be mentally retarded. I was still in the early phases of shock and mourning. Retrospectively this emotional instability on my part proved useful for confronting the pain and terror of physical and sexual brutality in street culture. It also gave me a more critical perspective on the subjective limits of ethnographic methods. These realizations began, once again, with an emotional sense of betrayal at the hopelessly idealistic and elitist education that I had received in graduate school where most of my professors and fellow students had safely taken refuge in a simplistic cultural relativism that celebrated exotic others. In anthropology doctoral programs, we almost never address the blood, sweat, and tears of real peoples, suffering real oppressions, in the imagined communities immediately surrounding our university campuses. Anthropology's fundamental methodological caveat of suspending moral judgment is occasionally problematized on an intellectual level, but it also needs to be confronted emotionally if it is to help us address effectively and with respect the lives of the

millions of people who survive in settings of extreme social misery.

I feel no need—as a human, an anthropologist, or a cultural critic—to forgive Caesar for his celebration of brutality against the vulnerable. I must admit, though, that I feel some sense of dishonesty at having hid my dislike for him throughout my residence in El Barrio out of ethnographic opportunism. This became worse when a few months later I found out that Caesar was battering not only his wife, but also her two-and-a-half-year-old son. It became clear to me why people move to segregated suburbs as soon as they can afford to, and perhaps also why postmodernism and cultural studies focus on signs, sounds, and text at the expense of ethnographic engagement. As a social structural victim—which Caesar most obviously is—he is good to neither himself, his community, nor his family. On the level of theory, being angry at Caesar has helped me understand the contradictory process whereby victims become the most immediate administrators of their community's oppression on a daily basis.

In the same context of internal hierarchies of abuse and domination, Caesar also helped me deepen my understanding of the crucial role that gender oppression, specifically misogyny, plays in poisoning daily life on inner-city streets. In the course of that same midnight schoolyard conversation, sensitive to my emotional disarray, Caesar attempted to comfort me via macho, sexist bonding. Of course, this merely uncovered the Pandora's box of gender-based brutality that my anthropological education had studiously ignored: rape (Winkler 1991).

In the male hierarchies that ambitious street-oriented boys attempt to scale, sexual domination over girls and substance abuse become central parameters for male solidarity and schoolyard status.

Caesar: Niggas wouldn't bother me. I didn't have too much violence, because I used to always be like rappin' to girls and shit. . . . We used to break the lock and go out on the roof; rape bitches; and have some sex.

Jaycee: You a fuckin' asshole Caesar!

Philippe: Word! Schmuck!

Primo: [coaxingly] Nah, you exaggerating Caesar. You didn't really rape them, but just smoked cheeba and everything, and fuck around with them. *Verdad?*

Caesar: [laughing, and smashing an empty quart of malt liquor against a ten-foot-tall spray-painted dragon] My bitch was raped, troop! . . . Yo! I'm thirsty, let's get some brews.

I vividly remember trying to persuade myself that Caesar was speaking metaphorically or was exaggerating. It was not until several years later as my relationship to the crackhouse dealers deepened that I developed sufficient *confianza* and *respeto* to tape-record intimate accounts of the sexual violence that they rou-

tinely engaged in during their adolescent years. Within their peer group of high school and junior high school dropouts, the gang rape of girlfriends and female acquaintances was institutionalized as a male ritual for coming of age, and as a means for bonding around sexual domination and misogyny (Bourgeois 1996).

Being a Special-Ed Nigga': Learning Street Skills

Of the approximately two dozen crack dealers I had close enough relationships with to tape-record life histories, Caesar was the most violent and psychologically unstable. Indeed, he parlayed his uncontrollable rages and substance abuse into a career and a relatively successful strategy for generating supplementary income. I have already noted how his reputation for gratuitous violence made him an effective lookout and bodyguard, guaranteeing him access to employment in the underground economy. It was also useful in the legal economy because it converted him into a legitimate recipient of SSI (Supplemental Security Income). Caesar's case for disability is not ambiguous, as his periodic suicide attempts clearly confirm. It was in junior high school, however, that he was declared certifiably "crazy." Throughout the inner-city school system during these same years, the special education category "emotionally disturbed" was becoming increasingly important.⁵ As a matter of fact, Caesar was a pioneer in this pedagogical growth industry:

They called me "emotionally disturbed" because my violence was a little wild, so they put me in Special Ed. . . . [Almost puffing out his chest] Ah'm'a Special-Ed person, Felipe. That's how come I be getting SSI and all that shit—because I was a violent, *loco*, nigga'. . . . The way I got into Special Ed was because I was cheeba'd up and I told this principal who was fuckin' with me for acting wild, something crazy like, "I heard voices." And that's when they put me on Thorazine. . . . They had us in a school on Ward's Island for Special Education. They used to experiment with Thorazine on the Spanish and black kids. They had us all on Thorazine. That was the testing ground for those drugs. Word up! . . . That lasted for like three years and then I was mainstreamed. I came back here.

Primo's future career in the underground economy was also established—or learned—at school. He spent most of his time in the hallways avoiding classrooms because they are the only physical space still under a modicum of teacher control in tough inner-city schools. His most important lessons revolved around selling and using drugs. In another class and ethnic setting, alcoholized autobiographical reminiscences in childhood schoolyards would probably elicit tales of playful mischief with only occasional overflows of offensive violence. In the courtyard of the

Graffiti Hall of Fame, however, this balance between "normal" adolescent rebellion and serious delinquency was reversed.

Primo: I was always in the hallways because they'd throw me out of class, 'cause I was malo—a son of a bitch.

Caesar: [aggressively] We used to go in posses, and burn rush through the hallways. Kick the shit outta niggas.

Primo: I used to go to school with like ten joints a day. And sell them in the basement where everybody be hanging, 'cause we got the special keys that you needed for the light switches. And we turned off all the lights in the basement—*hangeando*.

Philippe: What about you Jaycee? Did you graduate from junior high? Tell us some of your stories.

Jaycee: Naah, I fooled around too. I had to leave the school when I got pregnant.

Caesar: [interrupting] I never used to throw joints. I was a Special-Ed nigga', a big stupid nigga'. But I was doing a lot of drugs at that time. I became a playboy, because I just didn't give a fuck no more. I had women: Ah'm'a man. . . . I had a posse. We used to play dice.

Primo: Me, too. I loved to play dice.

As we left the schoolyard that night to drink more beer, I could not help wondering, once again, at the extraordinary skill and creative energy that was sprayed over the concrete walls all around us. Over the past two generations, this school has effectively channeled hundreds of children like Primo, Caesar, and Jaycee into careers of drug dealing, violent substance abuse, Social Security Insurance dependence, and single motherhood. Primo learned the entrepreneurial skills necessary for drug dealing when he stole the keys that controlled the basement's electrical system to set up shop "throwing joints." Caesar learned to take Thorazine and explain away his rage and violence by hearing voices. Even Jaycee learned the survival skill of escaping violence, meaninglessness, and unemployment by becoming pregnant.

On the street, individuals like Primo and Caesar are considered exceptionally smart. Most of them will remain trapped for life, however, in subservient positions in the underground economy. There is no technical solution for educating them. The most critical, emancipatory pedagogical techniques do not scratch the surface of the inner-city apartheid constraining their lives. Meanwhile, the proportion of children maturing into poverty continues to increase. As a matter of fact, it doubled between 1968 and 1994.⁶ Perhaps this overwhelming structural fact explains why the dialogue between education and anthropology has not borne more fruit either theoretically or practically. The social sciences arbitrarily marginalize researchers interested in schools, confining their publications to lower prestige journals and funneling them to teach in institutions that are certified only to dispense EDD

degrees to their graduate students. Anthropologists who might bridge this gap avoid the urgent social suffering in their home communities by continuing their century-old commitment to celebrating exotic others in distant lands or by radically deconstructing signs and symbols that are intelligible only to suburbanized intellectuals. The majority of anthropologists avoid venturing into unpleasant hometown neighborhoods where they must face the underside of their class privilege.

Ethnography's tremendous potential for initiating contradictory dialogues that violate cross-class and interracial taboos in our home environments remains mostly untapped. Academics of all ethnic backgrounds usually remain trapped in white public space; they flee the personal vulnerability and hideous, emotionally confusing brutality that engaging addicts, dealers, and petty criminals on their own turf requires. In this attempt to convey through my conversations with drug dealers the cacophony of victims who victimize on the street, I worry about the inherent pornography of violence that automatically engulfs any presentation of the details of extreme social suffering in the United States. Someone like Caesar does not need to be apologized for; he does not represent the Puerto Rican or Nuyorican communities; and his existence does not cast aspersions upon the "worthiness" of the poor in the inner city more broadly. Caesar does, however, embody the social injustice of a nation that systematically chews up its most vulnerable citizens and spits them out onto inner-city streets where their desperate celebration of suffering terrorizes themselves, their neighbors, and their loved ones. Worse yet, the agency of their internalized self-destructive rage convinces society to blame individual victims for social problems. Understanding and representing these problems offers more than an intellectual exercise for ethnography: It is an urgent political challenge.

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Notes

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1. Laviera 1985; Martin 1994; A. Rodriguez 1993; Santiago 1993; and Thomas 1967.
2. See discussions by Lauria-Perricelli 1989 and C. Rodriguez 1995.
3. Katz 1986 and C. Rodriguez 1995. It is set in the Freudian culture and personality school that dominated U.S. anthropology in the 1950s through the 1960s, and it unconsciously evokes the ideological biases of U.S. popular culture.
4. Bourgois 1989, 1996 and Devine in press.
5. Gutierrez 1995 and Richardson and Parker 1993.
6. Bernstein 1994 and *New York Times* 1994.

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Breast-Feeding as a Sustainable Resource System

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IN THE AGE of “equal pay for equal work,” affirmative action, and women’s rights, women’s political equality may deny women’s essential difference from men. Notwithstanding recent scholarly work that questions the “dichotomous framing of equality and difference” (Landsman 1995:35) due to the obfuscation of differences between women based on class, race, ethnicity, and age, I argue that the biological difference between women and men warrants investigation in regard to social roles and cultural expectations. The quest for social and political equality in late capitalist economy has forced many women into “genderless thought,” as Ivan Illich (1982) would have it, defining women’s reality in competition with men’s and thus also in terms of the Western scientific patriarchal model.

Challenging the premise of capitalist wage economy brings the devalued assessment of women’s labor into focus.¹ Women’s labor is valued, and women and men value women for their unpaid labor and essential work. It is not that the unpaid work of child care and kin care, gardening, and tending the home that women have done is unimportant and nonessential; the problem today is that it has not been waged and, hence, valued in a standardized and measurable way. Even when some aspects of “women’s work” have gone public, been institutionalized, and become waged, it has been valued as hierarchically lower in both wage and status than men’s labor.

The Value of Women’s Household Provision

Women represented 61.5 percent of all persons in the labor force in the United States in 1990. At the same time, women experienced their highest labor force participation rate—57.8 percent—and of the 54 million employed women in the United States, 40 million worked full time, while 14 million held part-time jobs. Fully 59 percent of married women with present spouses were in the labor force in 1992, and the labor force composition indicates that 70 percent of working mothers are employed full time, with almost half of working women having children who are under the age of one.² The implications of these statistics for understanding the nature of waged labor and unpaid labor for women and for understanding sex roles in household economies are complex and profound.

In the late-20th-century United States, the household economy can be seen as a source of sustainability for families.³ Immanuel Wallerstein and Joan Smith outline five sources of income, which include the most important among the multiple forms of income or resources that sustain households on an annual basis. These include wages, market sales, rent, transfer, and subsistence or direct labor input (1990:37–39). Barter and trading of goods and services, especially child care, represent additional sources of income.

Historically and prehistorically, women’s labor has provided an estimated one-half to four-fifths of household sustenance (Bernard 1981). Today in postindustrial America, mothers working in the paid labor force provide significant income to household units, as can be inferred from the above statistics. Yet