OVERACHIEVEMENT IN THE UNDERGROUND ECONOMY: THE LIFE STORY OF A PUERTO RICAN STICK-UP ARTIST IN EAST HARLEM

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ABSTRACT

The life story of an employment counselor in East Harlem debunks the immigrant American dream of upward mobility, individual achievement, and material opportunity. Based on several years of participant-observation conversations, this article traces in street language the life cycle of a charismatic workaholic individual through graffiti writing, gang banging, school (non) attendance, adolescent violence, parental discipline, substance abuse, armed robbery, gratuitous murder, drug dealing, incarceration, and legal employment. It reveals the contradictions of individual agency and achievement in the context of structural marginalization in the underground economy and street culture. The opportunity structure available to second generation inner-city youth in the United States often channels overachievers into destructive behavior.

INTRODUCTION

"If I could be standing here in front of you today, any one of you can make it out there. You just gotta set your mind to it." Waving his arms at the chipping paint on the cinderblocks and the exposed pipes criss-crossing the ceiling of his cramped basement classroom, Tito Ortega, a trainer at a motivational achievement employment organization, is a charismatic survivor from East Harlem's streets. He desperately believes the dream of individualistic achievement that is promoted by the low-budget non-profit job training program where he had been working for over a year since his release from 10 years in prison at the time I met him in the early 1990s. Crammed into the basement of the primarily Puerto Rican housing project where he grew up, Tito and his colleagues treat their work as would missionaries. The fundamental philosophy of these kinds of motivational job training programs is that "...these people have an attitude problem." Through a boot camp approach, they rip apart the already fragile self-esteem of their unemployed—often depressed and anxious—clients, in order to reconstruct them with an epiphenal realization that they want to find jobs as security guards, messengers, and data input clerks in just-above-minimum-wage service sector positions.

Of course Tito is not telling the truth. He is not a realistic role model. He is not a run-of-the-mill survivor from violent inner-city streets. Most people in his classroom will not "make it" in New York City's legal labor market no matter how much they want to, or how good their attitude is. Most of his students are second- or third- generation descendants of African American and Puerto Rican rural immigrants who now find themselves excluded from the precarious working class niches formerly occupied by their parents. In fact, Tito himself was just barely holding on to his own tenuous grasp on legal employment, despite the fact that he has always been an overachieving workaholic. The global restructuring of New York City's service- and finance-based economy is no longer offering the working poor the hope of stable, unionized factory employment (Rodriguez 1989; Wacquant 1995; Wilson 1996). Those production jobs have disappeared overseas where labor is cheaper. As second generation American-born youths, Tito's clients are not exploitable enough to be able to compete with the new rural immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and Africa—many of whom are undocumented—who are increasingly filling the lowest wage service-sector positions of New York's restructured labor market (Sassen-Koob 1986).

I met Tito when we were both 31 years-old. I lived across the street from his housing project for almost 5 years in the late 1980s and early 1990s where I was conducting participant-observation among a network of street dealers at the height of the crack epidemic. We tape-recorded our conversations, which I present here in edited, contextualized form, not because Tito's life history is typical of inner-city youth, but on the contrary, because his remarkable exceptionalism as an over-achiever reveals the extraordinary structural constraints that destroy the lives of smart, energetic Puerto Rican men in El Barrio, New York. Methodologically, my relationship with Tito is that of a participant-observer with a long-term personal (as close to organic as possible) relationship to his community and social network. I did not use a formal interview protocol; on the contrary, I purposefully engaged in the anthropological technique of initiating open-ended conversations in a relaxed, friendly setting. This enabled his life story to emerge more organically from our everyday interactions rather

than from a more selfconsciously manipulative and power-ridden presentation of self (Bourgois 1995). The life story presented in this story, consequently, is actually an edited combination of over a half-dozen conversations spanning a two-year time frame.

Through Tito's life story, the central contradictions of U.S. ideology, which legitimizes poverty and inequality through a psychologically reductionist, blame-the-victim bias, become apparent (MacLeod 1995). Throughout his youth, the more Tito tried to seize control of his life and grab a piece of the American Pie, the more he was drawn into self-destruction and community havoc. On a deeper theoretical level, Tito's life story allows us to explore the problematic relationship between structure and agency (Giddens 1984), because the conditions of extreme oppression shaping his life articulate with his exceptional charisma, to demonstrate the unintended consequences of individual achievement. Popular culture in the United States, with its overarching emphasis on individual achievement, is clearly refracted in how Tito excelled in street culture society and its thriving criminal economy.

A brilliant, articulate man, Tito has never been a passive victim of the structures of economic exploitation and racial oppression that shape daily life in the U.S. inner city. On the contrary, he has always been an active victim and an effective victimizer. Building on Merton's (1994) concept of social structure and anomie (Cloward, Ohlin 1960) and more recent developments in cultural reproduction theory at the interfaces of anthropology, education, and gender studies (Foley 1990; Fordham 1996; MacLeod 1995; Messerschmidt 1993; Willis 1981) I want to illustrate the dynamics whereby Tito's exceptional agency propelled him into a nightmare of destruction. Precisely because he was ambitious, worked hard, persevered, and excelled at everything he did during his youth, Tito became an agent of violence, crime, substance abuse, personal suffering, and community destruction. He pursued aggressively and faithfully a dominant script for becoming a successful male. Following Merton, it is the internalization of the American Dream under structural conditions of adversity in the inner city which spawns a thriving underground economy administered through everyday violence.

GANG LIFE

Predictably, in the early 1970s Tito immersed himself with all his energy into New York City's gang life in early adolescence. His peer group and his opportunities for emotional and material reward were rooted in the universe of street gangs that controlled public youth space in his neighborhood (Moore, Vigil, Levy 1995; Sanchez-Jancowski 1991; Taylor 1990; Vigil 1988). He began, harmlessly enough, with the all-too-human search for public recognition within his immediate community:

> My whole experience with fucking up on the streets started when I started defacing the subways as an adolescent: hangin' out late; writin' on subways.
>
> My tag was JT 115—you know. Everybody knew me by my tag name. And I felt good about that. And everybody said, "Oh shit, that's JT" [pointing at an imaginary subway train going by].
>
> I started getting a little older and that's when I started noticing about a tendency within me—you know. Because instead of buying a magic marker—you understan' what I'm sayin'—I would take it *off of somebody*—you know. And that's how my reputation started. I stopped the graffiti thing and I went into gang-bustin'.

Gang life offered Tito a platform from which to develop his leadership skills. His initial motivation to become organically involved was to avoid victimization without having to retreat from public space and social interaction.

> I had the fear of going out of my block to another block by myself because I didn't want to get my ass kicked by another gang. You understand where I'm coming from?
>
> Because back in them days a man would measure his manhood by how he used his hands. [Absentmindedly flexing his biceps] So what I did was I started my own gang. I was really good with my hands. See how it works... I was in the boxing team.
>
> So what I did was, all the guys that I knew; that I felt comfortable with; that I knew I could tell what to do; but who weren't punks... So all these guys who didn't want me to beat them up, right, became the Court Jesters—right here in the projects. We controlled this building.
>
> I was the self-proclaimed president. I collected dues. I did all that by myself 'cause I wanted to put myself in the position where I could feel in power, you understand what I'm saying?
>
> And we became pretty big. We became popular with the girls. And we had our colors on our

jackets—doin' our little thing—mostly fighting.

DRUG DEALING

Tito was still too young during those early years of gang fighting to use drugs. In fact he was disgusted by them, recognizing their destructiveness on his older peers.

> I stayed away from drugs at that time. I knew what they was doin'. I'm fairly intelligent, so I came up with this assessment that there's so many dope fiends in the world today because the high is so fuckin' good. I realized why all my friends became addicted to it. I mean, the high is great. Later I shot heroin one time, and I can't even explain it, man.
>
> Well anyway, I wanted to be productive, you know, I wanted to be a good kid. So I thought, I had a choice: Either I can be addicted to heroin and look like my dope fiend friends; or I can get out of it right then and there and that's what I chose to do.
>
> I wasn't gonna let my decision-making process be affected by any kind of mind-altering substance. I was having fun—bad fun, you understand?—but in a clean sense.

It was merely a question of time, however, before the logic of the underground economy's most powerful money-making industry overwhelmed Tito. Being ambitious, he threw his lot in with the only growing equal opportunity employer for males in the U.S. inner city.

> But then we started like dealing drugs. Not dope [heroin], just reefer. Because dope [heroin] was still something that you stayed away from.
>
> So the shit like really progressed, and I started selling reefer right from my house with my mother, my sisters, and everybody living there. People were coming in my house before they even went to school to buy a bag of reefer off me, and things of that nature.
>
> And that's where it all started for me. I mean that shit progressed, because at school I was dressing a little better than the next guy. The next guy was a nerd, and I was cool. I had all the pretty girls.
>
> I was intelligent as far as education was concerned, but I was dealing with peer pressure.

The fallout from being a successful street dealer is to become eventually a substance abuser. Indeed, it is rare for street dealers not to use their product (Bourgois 1995; Dunlap 1992; Williams 1989).

> Two of the guys that was down with my gang was smoking reefer. And I seen them. That's like the first time I started fucking with drugs. I smoked reefer. I started smoking reefer, reefer, reefer.
>
> It started progressing. You know in the gang situation we started finding ourselves in positions where we had to fight rival gangs, you know. And before I can like throw my nerves up to fight somebody in another rival gang, I would have to be fucked up, you know what I'm saying? So I wouldn't feel the pain, ok?
>
> And I would win the fight and then I'd feel really good about myself, so then I would get high, you know, as a prize.
>
> I started noticing that I had this like violent tendency within me, man. I knew one day that it was going to like put me behind bars; you understand what I'm saying?
>
> I started progressing in the get-high, really fucking up man. I started drinking wine. And wine also made me wild. I started noticing a lot of violent shit within me. That's how come I don't drink wine today.

CRIME, VIOLENCE, AND THE UNDERGROUND ECONOMY

Selling drugs, getting high, and gang-banging were not enough for Tito. He was more ambitious, a classic Horatio Alger in Merton's sociological model of social structure and anomie:

> I wanted better for myself, but you know, I wasn't going to sacrifice the time. I didn't want to work because I felt I deserved to be out there with my friends so I started sticking-up.
>
> My first experience ever in stickin' anybody up was a Yellow Cab. I used to take the subway downtown 'til like 14th Street, jump in the cab with a loaded pistol, tell the cab to drop me off at 120th Street and Park Avenue. And then put the fuckin' gun to the cabbie's head, to take his little bit of chump change and cut out. I did that shit like fuckin' 20 times in a row all by myself.
>
> It was a personal thing. It was really fucked up because my father at that time was a cab driver.
>
> You see, my father came from Puerto Rico with this iron fist type of rules and regulations, "I whistle and you come up here or I kickin' your ass." But he always had this fear that somebody would get in his cab and rob him; yet little did he know I was robbin' his colleagues at the time.
>
> He whipped me hard all the time. I mean, I could be in the park and he whistles and I come

in a minute late and have my ass whipped. And I know it. So why come in a minute late at 6:00 when I can get the same ass whippin' at 12 o'clock at night? That's the kind of logic that I used back then for stayin' in the streets.

Stick-up artists occupy the most dangerous, but high profit, niche of the underground economy. One has to be skilled "and have heart" to survive in this occupation for any length of time. Indeed, before expanding into becoming the leader of a band of armed robbers specializing in assaulting drug dealers, Tito honed his skills in high school. The institution that was supposed to be educating Tito was so out of control that it really did teach him vocational career skills that rendered him more successful later in life:

My thing was guns; as a matter of fact, I got thrown out of Samuel Gompers vocational high school for pulling a handgun on some people. I was about 15. I put the gun in the teacher's face. But before the security guards and stuff came I ran down the stairs and out the back.

But I really wasn't officially terminated from the school. I didn't go back. But no other school would accept me because they didn't know who the fuck I was, because they still had all my school records on file at my old school, and I couldn't go back.

I tried a number of schools. A lot of vocational schools, Westinghouse, Chelsea, Benjamin Franklin, Julia Richman. They wouldn't take me.

So what happened was this, man: I falsified some documentation, and I made a fake I.D., and I hung out at Richman.

Practically all of East Harlem went to Julia Richman. I spent 2 years in Richman. I swear to God! Back and forth, in classes and everything. They thought I was a fuckin' regular student but they never had me on file.

One day I went into the bathroom. There was a bunch of morenos—Black kids—and they were shooting dice, and I was strapped. I had a gun on me. So I said, "Fuck that shit! [snapping his fingers] I'm gonna go back in, and I'm gonna rob all these motherfuckers." It was kinda winter time, and so I bought one of those ski caps from a friend of mine, and ripped some holes for eyes.

I told my friend, "Don't let nobody in." I went back in the bathroom with that shit on and I stuck all of them up-took the dice and everything.

I started my own crap game in the schoolyard out back with the money I took from these dudes that was in the bathroom shootin' dice, 20 minutes ago.

Like any ambitious son of immigrants in America, Tito was determined to seize a piece of the pie. He was not unrealistic, however, about what institutional pathways were open to him for upward mobility. Like so many people in the United States—rich and poor—he invested a large part of his energy into a materialistic commodity fetishism.

I knew I wasn't going to graduate from Richman. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to be productive. I wanted to be a standup guy, but it just didn't work out that way. I ended up being a stick-up kid with no high school diploma or nothing.

I mean, I had the potential to be very, very, very good. Whatever it is I set my mind on doing, I possess the tools to do it. I'm meticulous, articulate; I'm punctual.

But I liked being young with a lot of money in my pocket, you know. I liked wearin' fancy clothes; I liked drivin' a new car. I liked my reputation.

This is what I'm talking about when I say I am a product of my community: You see a guy driving a Maxima, and you want a Maxima—Did you know I drive a Maxima now?

It's like if you see a guy standing on the corner with a gold chain, what incentive do you have to ever want to go to work legal? If your neighbor can pull in, in one day, what I'm making in 40 hours of work week. And he can wake up at 12 in the afternoon. What's the incentive?

I got tired of fuckin' making chump change with the cabs, I started getting greedy. So I did a stickup of a numbers spot. I did it by myself. I fucked up because it was in Manhattan and everybody heard about it. People were saying, "This young kid got a lot of spunk."

Lucky me that I didn't rob 'em for much and the motherfuckers didn't come looking for me.

But what did happen was I said to myself, I got to put together a crew. So one day I sat down with a coupla' guys and they said yeah.

We fucked our first job up and we didn't get nothing out of it. So then we come up with this suggestion, "Let's rob drug dealers who don't know who we are." You know what I'm sayin'? "It beats motherfuckers chasing us for blocks."

That's what happened. We started robbin' drug dealers in the Bronx. We was stickin' up corporations. I wouldn't walk in a place with a loaded handgun knowing there's four or five guys inside with guns too. So my thing was to get inside information from dissatisfied workers

and then catch the agency off guard like a sneak attack situation.

Nobody ever seen my face. Nobody knew who the fuck we was. We always used masks and football jerseys. Each jersey had a number on it. They were see-through fishnet jerseys. We called each other by the number. We never called nobody by their names.

I used to walk into a building with a duffel bag full of 45 automatics and a sawed-off shotgun—understand? Nobody knew who the hell I was. I kept a football helmet on top. Everybody figured I was carrying my football equipment.

And me and my crew never walked in together. We didn't even take the elevator together.

Two used to go up the stairs; one go this way; one go that way; one take that elevator; the other one take that elevator. Depending on the floor we'd meet two floors below, you know. Everybody put the masks on, and catch the people off guard.

You know how many people I caught off guard? [smiling] One that I remember real, real good, was one of the biggest spots in the Bronx. I'm not even going to name the name because I don't want it to go public. They might still be lookin' for me. I'm talkin' about one of the biggest distributors in the Bronx. They had a set up of video cameras and walkie-talkies.

I talked to a coupla' guys who worked at the corporation. They got this feeling that they were being shafted. So what happened was they got me all the information as far as what time the place was open; what keys open what; what lock is this; what lock is that; the back way out; the front way out; you know what I'm tryin' to say...

This conversation, which I was tape-recording in my tenement living room opposite Tito's high-rise housing project, was interrupted by automatic weapon gunfire. The distracting noise, however, prompted Tito to reel off a series of accounts of particularly grisly hold-ups:

I did one drug spot one day, where they worked out of two apartments, A and B. They was sellin' drugs out of the apartment B, and the family lived in apartment A.

I had my information wrong and I went into the wrong apartment.

I had the whole family there. I had the grandmother, the mother, the son, the nephew, everybody tied up. And I couldn't find the drugs so I had to grab the mother. This lady was so loyal to her husband, who owned the place, that I had to put a dagger to her neck and actually draw blood before she would tell me where the drugs were at.

I probably would have killed her. I had a nasty reputation, and I had to get what I wanted at that time.

It wasn't till I drew blood that she gave me the keys to the next apartment. Okay, then inside the next apartment, while we was packin' shit up, there's people knockin' on the door, wantin' to buy drugs.

So I started lettin' 'em in; tyin' em up; and takin' their money, their jewelry, and everything. This was right across the street from the police precinct, in broad dayfight; like 4:00 in the afternoon, in a housing project.

I knew stick up crews all over the city, Brooklyn, Bronx, Manhattan, Queens. We would trade information. I even know guys that tried to stick my organization up.

I reminded myself that Tito was only a teenager during this eventful money-making period of his life and I asked him how he managed to trust the fellow members of his stick-up crew. I expected to hear a classic gang litany about homeboy solidarity—the kind of almost touchy-feely love/bonding that gang members in California or the Southwest revel in communicating to outsiders. I was wrong. Tito did not trust his crew. He controlled them through violent intimidation. Indeed, the extraordinary levels of interpersonal violence on inner-city streets which appear to be expressions of psychopathological dysfunction to outside observers are, in fact, functional in the criminal economy. Public displays of brutality are a way of investing in one's human capital—building one's credibility—when one seeks upward mobility in the underground economy (Bourgois 1989):

They were a lot older than me. If you can believe it, I was about 15—, 16—at the time. And these guys were in their early 20's. But I gave them the attitude that I had nothing to lose.

I gave up the sense that I was a little mentally disturbed, you understand what I'm sayin'. The things that I did, not everybody would do. It got to where I just about chopped off a guy's hand for a fucking diamond ring.

Sometimes I don't know what it is with me, but I intimidate people. As a matter of fact, it's surprising that we can sit here and talk because most people are *really* intimidated when they don't know me personally.

I do things spontaneously. My biggest asset is I can be dangerous when I smile [grinning at me widely]. And people don't know that. So I can laugh and still fuck you over at the same time. A lotta people consider me to be crazy.

So I left them to believe that I was a little crazy, so, you know...what I said went. They never disrespected me. I had a nasty reputation.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND SELF-DESTRUCTION

A side effect of being efficient at mobilizing violence and excelling as a leader in the underground economy is that one falls prey to the ideology of "respect". Tito was not able to do anything productive with his illicitly generated money besides cultivate a street reputation. His universe for excelling and for channelling his career ambitions was confined by the opportunity structures engulfing his inner city streets and his gang/crew-bounded network of friends.

I liked being a stick-up artist because it gave me a reputation. I had money but nobody knew where I was getting my money from.

I was living with my mother in the projects but I used up all that money. It's obvious that I wasn't really mentally business orientated. None of us were because if we had been we'd probably be on top of the world today.

I'd come to the park with a stack of money in my pocket and I'd see 15 of my friends sittin' down doin' nothing. I'd say, "Come on, let's go to the movies." I'd pay for all the cabs, the movies and then cocaine and reefer. We was smokin' pounds of reefer.

Tito was a workaholic and deeply respected his mother as much as he resented his father. In another setting he might not have ended up so violent on the street. He desperately wanted his mother to recognize him as hard-working, but he was also determined to develop the skills necessary for success in the underground economy.

But I never wanted my mother to believe that I was actually doing the things that she heard I was doin' so I got a job working at La Marketa full-time, 40 hours a week.

But I wouldn't leave my house without a gun. When everybody was gone, I used to bring out the big Webster dictionary—that it took my father 18 months to pay for—and put it at the end of the hall; and I used to sit at the other end; and I used to shoot the gun.

That's what I would do. That's how I used to deal with my free time.

Since he excelled at everything withi his reach and had too much energy to keep o the streets, it was only a question of time b fore Tito began abusing the drugs that floo U.S. inner cities. Youths embracing street cu ture often bond with one another around drug It is almost impossible to escape them. Drug are so accessible they become normalized- almost a rite of passage. For example, even a the time of this conversation, some doze years after the fact, Tito could not resist bein proud of the unpredictable wildness of h drug-abusing days. It was almost as if the e tent of his self-punishment through drugs wa proof to him of his superior mind and body.

I did favors for people. They owed me, but I didn't want money, because I had just got a stack of money, so my compensation was, "I want you to give me get-high". They used to give me get-high.

I was on cocaine and then I was introduced to angel dust. I don't know what the fuck attracted me to that shit, man. I started abusing angel dust and I became very violent.

I don't know what it is with me physically. Biologically, I'm supposed to be fuckin' dead! With all this shit that I done to myself, you know.

I mean, I'm 31 years old and I drank as much liquor as anybody else out there. I'm talkin' about drinking bum-fucking cheap wine, from 9 o'clock in the morning, man, to 12 midnight, for fuckin' years in a row!

But my insides feel great. I don't know what the fuck they look like. But they feel great.

I smoked so much fuckin' dust; I sniffed so much cocaine that my nose is supposed to have holes in it and my brain is supposed to have *melted*.

But it's not. I feel great.

Mainstream U.S. society easily dismis es Tito as an abnormal psychopath. This kir of normalizing psychological reductionist i terpretation however, obfuscates the soci processes that produce Tito's violence ar self destruction. He was simply pursuing h realistic options to their logical extreme Through his violence and substance abuse h was living up to his fullest potential within th universe of his street-bounded logic, comm sense, and personal community:

I can actually go back to the night when I killed this guy, because I'll never forget it. It's what I did ten years in jail for.

I really didn't have no reason for doing it, because I had already almost beat the fuckin' dude to death. There was no reason for me to put four or five slugs in him. But I did it anyway, because I wanted to do it. I was high on angel dust.

He had robbed me earlier that evening. He put a double sawed-off shotgun to my face. I was selling a bunch of cocaine and I had a whole bunch of jewelry and he took it all.

I saw him later that night when I went to the *bodega* [corner grocery store] to get my girl a fuckin' Three Musketeers candy bar. He started running. I chased him. I stopped him. I had him against the wall.

I beat the shit out of this kid. Not with my fists but with a handgun. I mean I hit with the gun in his fuckin' face about 20 different times.

The kid was on his knees begging. The motherfucker was crawling away from me when I shot him five times. So I didn't really have to do it.

PRISON

Since the 1970s (1973-1993) the size of the U.S. prison population has increased tenfold (Melossi, Lettiere 1997; Tonry 1995). Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, what could be called a "criminal industrial complex" has emerged as the primary recipient of government subsidy in the United States. With the whittling away of the already rickety social welfare safety net in the United States, and its replacement by a wellfunded police drag net, public policy has focused on criminalizing poverty. Prisons have become a primary socializing institution for increasingly large cohorts of inner-city males.[1]

Prison didn't slow me down. At first, I just learned to be a better criminal. I was doin' the same thing in jail that I was doin' in the streets: I had a bunch of assholes following me; and I would tell them to rob this guy, or that guy for his sneakers—just so I could wear them. Or, "I like that shirt his girlfriend brought him. Take his shirt!" Or, "This guy just came off the visit, man, he got a' ass fulla' drugs: Take him to the bathroom and make him shit. Take his drugs."

I was all about worrying about how clean my sneakers were, and if my pants were sewed, and ironed, and pressed correctly. My shirt was pressed to impress...who? A bunch of nobodies.

I used to catch motherfuckers in the bathroom when they just came from a visit and I knew they had drugs up their ass. I used to put a motherfuckin' home-made shank [knife] in peoples' fuckin' necks while they was shittin' so they could shit their drugs out. Right there in the gym bathroom with the fuckin' population of 200 inmates runnin' around—police there and everything.

My thing was like, man, if I can get-over in here where I'm guarded 24 hours a day, they'll never catch me in New York.

I stabbed motherfuckers. I sliced motherfuckers. The only thing I didn't do was kill any motherfuckers.

I even took one of the men I stabbed to the infirmary. They locked me up in the box—which is considered solitary confinement—for investigation, as far as that stabbing is concerned. But I had a witness that said I didn't do it.

Unlike most inmates Tito changed his life direction in prison. First he had to quit drugs.

When I was incarcerated I did even more drugs than what I was doing out on the street because I was holding people up—I had a crew in there too—and my girl was bringing me cocaine. I became addicted to cocaine when I was incarcerated.

In jail, you smuggle drugs in balloons which you swallow and then shit them out. One day, I was in the visiting room with my girl, and she had brought some loose cocaine along with three balloon-fulls.

I snorted the loose cocaine in the back of the visiting room and then I couldn't swallow the balloons when it came time to leave so I stuffed 'em ...you know... [pointing to his rear].

So as soon as I went back to my cell I sat on the toilet and let the balloons out. But I was already so fuckin' high that I flushed the toilet by mistake.

That's when I knew I was hooked, because I stuck my motherfuckin' hand up to here [pointing to his shoulder] in that toilet bowl.

I mean, that's when it actually hit me and I knew I had to do something that would change my life. I had to make a decision. I mean, "What the fuck are you doin', man? You got half your fuckin' arm stuck in the toilet bowl. You're fucked. You have to make a decision: either you're going to stay fucked up or you're going to change."

So I decided to start going to drug programs.

In a way, jail worked out for me.

Tito was lucky that he had access to education in prison:

> I met up with this guy who was a lot older than me. He's already been in there like 15 years. He told me, "You got leadership qualities. You goin' to be in here forever if you don't take advantage of their college program"—they'd given me three extra years for extortion. "Get a high school diploma. I been keepin' my eye on you."
>
> At first I was like, "Why you keepin' an eye on me? You a faggot or something?"
>
> But then, I listened. He told me, "I got all this education under my belt in here. You too can use it to your advantage. I'm not even going to go home. I wish I could give you everything I learned."
>
> Finally, I came to the conclusion that incarceration isn't the answer because it's boring and I knew I'd be going back in when I went out—just be a revolving door if I didn't take advantage of the education they had to offer in jail.
>
> I got my G.E.D. and I went to college.

One of the crucial steps in Tito's "reform" was overcoming the fear of losing respect in street culture by violating the norms of masculinity (Connell 1987; Jefferson, Carlen 1996; Messerschmidt 1993):

> At first, the bad thing was that all the guys that was going to college, they had this reputation that they were all fucking geeks, or something, and I didn't want to fit into that category; didn't want to be a sucker; didn't want to be a geek.

INADEQUATE SOLUTIONS

Immediately upon his release from prison Tito returned to the underground economy. He felt like he practically had no choice and went into drug dealing, marketing his own brand of heroin:

> What really scared me was when I did come back home, it was like I never skipped a beat. I was back in the streets in two seconds.
>
> I went out there with this jailhouse attitude and mentality. You know, the badass in the neighborhood, attracting people for all the wrong reasons until I realized one day it was going to get me killed in no time.
>
> I knew I possessed the tools that a lot of people don't possess. I have a high school diploma, some college, a sense of purpose, a lot of experience, but I was hindered because of my past criminal history. I had this big wall blocking in front of me. I just couldn't get through the wall.
>
> I tried to muscle in selling dope on that corner [gesturing out the window]. I put out my own label. I had my own stamp and everything: Absolute—that was my brand name. It was a joint venture. I put out a ounce of dope on the street. I lost a lot of money.
>
> Then I realized I could've fell back into sniffing cocaine and shit like that. I realized one day it was going to get me killed in no time. I had my back against the wall.
>
> It was really a completely whole different atmosphere on the streets than what it used to be. All my old contacts were nobody. It was a whole new world out there. It was all crack—that goddamn drug.
>
> There's no more self-respect. Today knowing how to use your hands is not even a determinating factor. Nobody wants to fight with their hands no more. You get a fifteen-year-old kid pullin' out a gun on you for lookin' at him the wrong way.
>
> Puts fear in my heart because I don't want to be killed by no fifteen-year-old kid because of the way I looked at him. A lot of the kids can't give you no answer why they put a gun to a guy's head. They doin' it for pleasure to them.
>
> Put it this way, the streets changed me the second time around. I had no idea they was going to be this wild. Case in point: that kid last week, man, pulled out a gun on four little kids, shot them in the head. 'Cause of what? 'Cause of disrespect. There's not that much disrespect left in the world. And I already knew what this kind of future entails: institutions, institutions, and institutions.
>
> The best thing that happened to me then, was I walked in here [opening his arms and smiling at the cramped cinderblock basement office.] I got this like sense of belonging because they [pointing to the director of the program at a desk in the far corner of the office] generally have been through the things that I been through.
>
> So they sat me down. We talked. They looked at what I had to offer. They didn't give me this runaround bullshit story because of my past and things of that nature. They felt that I did have something to offer. They decided it was like, "Yo, what's more best for you is to give back into your community due to the fact that you was born and raised here, and this is your past."
>
> They got me a job as a counselor in a drug treatment program. That was the best thing that

ever happened to me. I became a supervisor over there; practically ran the program. But then I became discontent with it. They never gave me no pay raise. I felt I was being used.

So after a year and some change, I came back over here and they hired me as a job counselor and now I been a year here.

The institution that was giving meaning to Tito's life by allowing him to help people like himself could not overcome the structural marginalization of its community. Ironically, much of their counseling work serves to legitimize U.S. blame-the-victim ideology. Building on Foucault (1963, 1980) we can understand this well-meaning, socially liberal, self-help (up-by-your-bootstraps) institution as a front line administrator of the "normalizing gaze" that forces the socially marginal to confess and internalize their deficiencies. The boot-camp-style harangues of the job training seminars where each individual confesses his or her powerlessness in front of unemployment serves to discipline recalcitrant workers into accepting boring, low-paid service jobs. Those who resist and/or drop out of the program are often sufficiently humiliated by the confessional forum of the job training seminars to suspect that they really are poor and unemployed because of their own individual shortcomings.

It is easy to critique the premise of psychologically motivating—or even manipulating—desperately poor people to accept their subordination in inadequately remunerated entry-level labor markets. The problem, however, is to develop an alternative in the short-term, or even in the long-run, that provides structurally oppressed people with the opportunity to exercise their agency productively. Despite the emancipatory faith of theorists and practitioners in the field of critical pedagogy (Ellsworth 1989), educational institutions are not a realistic forum for addressing the overwhelming problems faced by the crack dealers, addicts, and gang bangers taking refuge on inner city streets—especially when the number of children living in poverty doubled from 1968-1994 (*Business Week* 1994; Rainwater 1994). While the notion of building one's cultural capital (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992) with determined hard work—i.e., obtaining a GED or learning how to dress and manipulate eye contact during a job interview—is appealing, this subsidized up-by-your-bootstraps approach will never get drug dealers off of inner-city streets so long as the real value of the minimum wage continues to decline and income gaps widen (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1996; United Nations Development Program 1996). In fact, failing at these motivational achievement programs reconfirms the contradictory celebratory rejection of mainstream society--tinged with a profound sense of self-blame--and individual failure that most addicts and criminals already carry in their hearts.

Tito's ongoing tenuous survival in the legal world is a case in point of the internalization of these larger structural dynamics. He represents a best-case scenario of the potential of individual agency and up-by-your-bootstraps recovery. Despite his motivation, excitement, and idealism, however, he remains proudly trapped in the projects. He still lives in his mother's high rise apartment on a corner that is famous for being a hub for wholesaling angel dust. Most of his adolescent friends are either dead, in jail, or making large sums of money selling drugs. Meanwhile he earns legal "chump change" as a "motivational trainer" charged with persuading the neighbors and youths on his block to accept poorly-paid service-sector jobs in the white world downtown.

Indeed, Tito's hold on legal stability has proved not only personally painful, but also tenuous. Despite insisting—or perhaps because of insisting—that, "Nothing stops me from getting what I want," Tito spiraled every few months on weekend-long binges of alcohol and interpersonal violence, usually precipitated by arguments with his lover or by run-ins with disrespectful acquaintances. He would return to work hung-over, or with a fresh black eye—but on time—on Monday mornings to harangue boot-camp-style the unemployed men and women in his cramped basement classroom, reproducing the All-American lie: "Any one of you can make it out there. You just gotta believe in yourself." Indeed, tragically, as this article goes to press Tito continues to live the All-American lie. He was finally fired from his job for his ongoing alcoholism and substance abuse and is recycling himself through the criminal justice system.

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END NOTES

[1] California pioneered the U.S. strategy for criminalizing poverty through massive rates of incarceration. The institutional stability and social density of criminal networks in prison allowed for the emergence of highly structured, ethnicity-based corporate gangs that reach deep into the everyday activities of the underground economy on inner city streets—hence the Mexican Mafia (*la eme*), the Aryan Brothers, and the Black Guerrilla Family. The northeastern U.S. states followed over a decade later with the emergence in the 1990s of the prison-based Latin Kings.

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