

CHAPTER FOUR

No Shame in (This) Game

IN THE EARLY 1990s, the McDonald's Corporation launched a television ad campaign featuring a young black man named Calvin, who was portrayed sitting atop a Brooklyn stoop in his Golden Arches uniform while his friends down on the sidewalk passed by, giving him a hard time about holding down a "McJob." After brushing off their teasing with good humor, Calvin is approached furtively by one young black man who asks, *sotto voce*, whether Calvin might help him get a job too. He allows that he could use some earnings and that despite the ragging he has just given Calvin, he thinks the uniform is really pretty cool—or at least that having a job is pretty cool.

Every fast food worker we interviewed for this book knew the Calvin series by heart: Calvin on the job, Calvin in the streets, Calvin helping an elderly woman cross the street on his way to work, Calvin getting promoted to management. And they knew what McDonald's was trying to communicate to young people by producing the series in the first place: that the stigma clings to fast food jobs, that it can be overcome, and that even your best friends will come to admire you if you stick with it—after they've finished dissing you in public.

Americans have always been committed to the moral maxim that work defines the person. We carry around in our heads a rough tally that tells us what kinds of jobs are worthy of respect and what kinds are to be disdained, a pyramid organized by the income a job carries, the sort of credentials it takes to secure a particular position, the qualities of an occupation's incumbents—and we use this system of stratification (ruthlessly at times) to boost the status of some and humiliate others. This penchant for ranking by occupation is more pervasive in the United

States than in other societies, where there are different ways of evaluating the personal worth of individuals. In these societies, coming from a "good family" counts heavily in the calculus of social standing. Here in America, there is no other metric that matters as much as the kind of job you hold.

Given our tradition of equating moral value with employment, it stands to reason that the most profound dividing line in our culture is that separating the working person from the unemployed.¹ Only after this canyon has been crossed do we begin to make the finer gradations that distinguish white-collar worker from blue-collar worker, CEO from secretary. We attribute a whole host of moral virtues—self-discipline, personal responsibility, maturity—to those who have found and kept a job, almost any job, and dismiss those who haven't as slothful or irresponsible.

We inhabit an unforgiving culture that is blind to the many reasons why some people cross that employment barrier and others are left behind. While we may remember, for a time, that unemployment rates are high, or that particular industries have downsized millions of workers right out of a job, or that racial barriers or negative attitudes toward teenagers make it harder to get a job at some times and for some people, in the end American culture wipes these background truths out in favor of a simpler dichotomy: the worthy and the unworthy, the working stiff and the lazy sloth.

These days, our puritanical attitudes owe some of their force to the resentment the employed bear toward the taxes they must pay to support those who cannot earn on their own. But it has deeper cultural dimensions. From the earliest beginnings of the nation, work has been the *sine qua non* of membership in this society. Adults who work are full-fledged citizens in the truest sense of the term—complete participants in the social world that is most highly valued. No other dimension of life—community, family, religion, voluntary organizations—qualifies Americans for this designation of citizen in the same way.

We express this view in a variety of ways in our social policies. Virtually all our benefits (especially health care but including unemployment insurance, life insurance, child care tax credits, etc.) are provided through the employment system. In Western Europe this is often not the case: health care is provided directly through the tax system and benefits come to people who are political "citizens" whether they work or not. In the United States, however, those outside the employment system are categorized as unworthy and made to feel it by excluding them from these systems of support. To varying degrees, we "take care" of the socially excluded by creating stigmatized categories for their benefits—welfare

and Medicaid being prime examples. Yet we never confuse the approved, acceptable Americans with the undeserving, and we underscore the difference by separating them into different bureaucratic worlds.

For those on the positive side of the divide, those who work for a living, the rewards are far greater than a paycheck. The employed enter a social world in which their identities as mainstream Americans are shaped, structured, and reinforced. The workplace is the main institutional setting in which individuals become part of the collective American enterprise that lies at the heart of our culture: the market. We are so divided in other domains—race, geography, family organization, gender roles, and the like—that common ground along almost any other lines is difficult to achieve. Indeed, only in wartime do Americans tend to cleave to their national origins as a major feature of their self-concept. The French, by contrast, are French whether they work or not. But for our more diverse and divided society, participation in the world of work is the most powerful source of social integration.

It is in the workplace that we are most likely to mix with those who come from different backgrounds, are under the greatest pressure to subordinate individual idiosyncrasy to the requirements of an organization, and are called upon to contribute to goals that eclipse the personal. All workers have these experiences in common; even as segregation constrains the real mix of workers, conformity is expected to a greater degree for people who work in some kinds of jobs than in others, and the organizational goals to which they must subscribe are often elusive, unreachable, or at odds with personal desire.

The creation of an identity as a worker is never achieved by individuals moving along some preordained path. It is a transformation worked by organizations, firms, supervisors, fellow workers, and the whole long search that leads from the desire to find a job to the end point of landing one. This is a particularly dramatic transformation for ghetto youth and adults, for they face a difficult job market, high hurdles in convincing employers to take a chance on them, and relatively poor rewards—from a financial point of view—for their successes. But the crafting of an identity is an important developmental process for them, just as it is for their more privileged counterparts.

Powerful forces work to exclude minorities from full participation in American society. From a school system that provides a substandard education for millions of inner city kids, to an employment system rife with discrimination, to a housing market that segregates minority families,

there is almost no truth to the notion that we all begin from the same starting line. Precisely because this is the case, blasting one's way through the job barrier and starting down that road of acquiring a common identity as a mainstream worker is of the greatest importance for the young. It may be one of the few available pipelines into the core of American society, and the one with the greatest payoff, symbolic and material.

THE SOCIAL COSTS OF ACCEPTING LOW-WAGE WORK

Even though we honor the gainfully employed over the unemployed, all jobs are not created equal. Fast food jobs, in particular, are notoriously stigmatized and denigrated. "McJob" has become a common epithet for work without much redeeming value. The reasons for this are worth studying, for the minority workers who figure in this book have a mountain of stigma to overcome if they are to maintain their self-respect. Indeed, the organizational culture they join when they finally land a job at Burger Barn is instrumental in generating conditions and experiences that challenge a worker's self-esteem.²

As Robin Leidner has argued,³ fast food jobs epitomize the assembly-line structure of de-skilled service positions: they are highly routinized and appear to the casual observer to be entirely lacking in discretion—almost military in their scripted nature. The symbolic capital of these assembly-line jobs can be measured in negative numbers. They represent the opposite of the autonomous entrepreneur who is lionized in the popular culture, from *Business Week* to hip-hop.

Burger Barn workers are told that they must, at whatever cost to their own dignity, defer to the public. Customers can be unreasonably demanding, rude, even insulting, and workers must count backwards from a hundred in an effort to stifle their outrage. Servicing the customer with a smile pleases management because making money depends on keeping the clientele happy, but it can be an exercise in humiliation for teenagers. It is hard for them to refrain from reading this public nastiness as another instance of society's low estimation of their worth. But they soon realize that if they want to hold on to their minimum-wage jobs, they have to tolerate comments that would almost certainly provoke a fistfight outside the workplace.

It is well known among ghetto customers that crew members have to put up with whatever verbal abuse comes across the counter. That knowledge occasionally prompts nasty exchanges designed explicitly to anger the worker, to push him or her to retaliate verbally. Testing those limits is

a favorite pastime of teenage customers in particular, for this may be the one opportunity they have to put a peer on the defensive in a public setting, knowing that there is little the victim can do in return.

It is bad enough to be on the receiving end of this kind of abuse from adults, especially white adults, for that has its own significance along race lines. It is even worse to have to accept it from minority peers, for there is much more personal honor at stake, more pride to be lost, and an audience whose opinion matters more. This, no doubt, is why harassment is a continual problem for fast food workers in Harlem. It burns. Their ages, with plenty of anger bottled up for all kinds of reasons extraneous to the restaurant experience, find counterparts working the cash register convenient targets for venting.

Robertta is a five-year veteran of Burger Barn who has worked her way up to management. A formidable African-American woman, Robertta has always prided herself on her ability to make it on her own. Most of her customers have been perfectly pleasant; many have been longtime repeat visitors to her restaurant. But Robertta has also encountered many who radiate disrespect.

Could you describe some of the people who came into the store during your shifts?

The customers? Well, I had alcoholics, derelicts. People that are aggravated with life. I've had people that don't even have jobs curse me out. I've dealt with all kinds. Sometimes it would get to me. If a person yelled out [in front of] a lobby full of people . . . "Bitch, that's why you work at [Burger Barn]," I would say [to myself], "I'm probably making more than you and your mother." It hurts when people don't even know what you're making and they say those things. Especially in Harlem, they do that to you. They call you all types of names and everything.

Natasha is younger than Robertta and less practiced at these confrontations. But she has had to contend with them nevertheless, especially from customers her age who at least claim to be higher up the status hierarchy. Though she tries, Natasha can't always control her temper and respond the way the firm wants her to.

It's hard dealing with the public. There are good things, like old people. They sweet. But the younger people around my age are always snotty. Think they better than you because they not working at [Burger Barn]. They probably work at something better than you.

How do you deal with rude or unfriendly customers?

They told us that we just suppose to walk to the back and ignore it, but when they in your face like that, you get so upset that you have to say something. . . . I got threatened with a gun one time. 'Cause this customer had threw a piece of straw paper in the back and told me to pick it up like I'm a dog. I said, "No." And he cursed at me. I cursed at him back, and he was like, "Yeah, next time you won't have nothing to say when I come back with my gun and shoot your ass." Oh, excuse me.

Ianna, who had just turned sixteen the summer she found her first job at Burger Barn, has had many of the same kinds of problems Natasha complains of. The customers who are rude to her are just looking for a place to vent their anger about things that have nothing to do with buying lunch. Ianna recognizes that this kind of thing could happen in any restaurant, but believes it is a special problem in Harlem, for ghetto residents have more to be angry about and fewer accessible targets. So cashiers in fast food shops become prime victims.

What I hate about [Burger Barn] is the customers, well, some of them that I can't stand. . . . I don't want to stereotype Harlem . . . but since I only worked in Harlem that's all I can speak for. Some people have a chip on their shoulders. . . . Most of the people that come into the restaurant are black. Most of them have a lot of kids. It's in the ghetto. Maybe, you know, they are depressed about their lifestyles or whatever else that is going on in their lives and they just . . . I don't know. They just are like, urff! And no matter what you do you cannot please them. I'm not supposed to say anything to the customer, but that's not like me. I have a mouth and I don't take no short from nobody. I don't care who it is, don't take anybody's crap.

Despite this bravado, Ianna knows well that to use her mouth is to risk her job. She has had to work hard to find ways to cope with this frustration that don't get her in trouble with management.

I don't say stuff to people most of the time. Mostly I just look at them like they stupid. Because my mother always told me that as long as you don't say nothin' to nobody, you can't never get in trouble. If you look at them stupid, what are they going to do? If you roll your eyes at somebody like that, I mean, that's really nothing [compared to] . . . cursing at them. Most of the time I try to walk away.

As Ianna observes, there is enough free-floating fury in Harlem to keep a steady supply of customer antagonism coming the way of service employees every day of their work lives. The problem is constant enough to warrant official company policies on how crew members should respond to insults, on what managers should do to help, on the evasive tactics that will work best to quell an ugly situation without losing the business. Management tries to minimize the likelihood of incidents by placing girls on the registers rather than boys, in the apparent belief that young women attract less abuse and find it easier to quash their anger than young men.

Burger Barn does what it can to contend with these problems in the workplace. But the neighborhood is beyond their reach, and there, too, fast food workers are often met with ridicule from the people they grew up with. They have to learn to defend themselves against criticism that they have lowered themselves by taking these jobs, criticism from people they have known all their lives. As Stephanie explains, here too she leans on the divide between the worker and the do-nothing:

People I hang out with, they know me since I was little. We all grew up together. When they see me comin', they laugh and say, "Here come Calvin, here come Calvin sister." I just laugh and keep on going. I say, "You're crazy. But that's okay 'cause I got a job and you all standing out here on the corner." Or I say, "This is my job, it's legal." Something like that. That Calvin commercial show you that even though his friends tease him he just brushed them off, then he got a higher position. Then you see how they change toward him.

Tiffany, also a teen worker in a central Harlem Burger Barn, thinks she knows why kids in her community who don't work give her such a hard time. They don't want her to succeed because if no one is "making it," then no one needs to feel bad about failing. But if someone claws her way up and it looks as if she has a chance to escape the syndrome of failure, it implies that everyone could, in theory, do so as well. The teasing, a thinly veiled attempt to enforce conformity, is designed to drag would-be success stories back into the fold.

What you will find in any situation, more so in the black community, is that if you are in the community and you try to excel, you will get ridicule from your own peers. It's like the "crab down" syndrome. . . . If

you put a bunch of crabs in a big bucket and one crab tries to get out, what do you think the other crabs would do now? According to my thinking, they should pull 'em up or push 'em or help 'em get out. But the crabs pull him back in the barrel. That's just an analogy for what happens in the community a lot.

Keeping everyone down protects against that creeping sense of despair which comes from believing things could be otherwise for oneself.

Swallowing ridicule would be a hardship for almost anyone in this culture, but it is particularly hard on minority youth in the inner city. They have already logged four or five years' worth of interracial and cross-class friction by the time they get behind a Burger Barn cash register. More likely than not, they have also learned from peers that self-respecting people don't allow themselves to be "dissed" without striking back. Yet this is precisely what they must do if they are going to survive in the workplace.

This is one of the main reasons why these jobs carry such a powerful stigma in American popular culture: they fly in the face of a national attraction to autonomy, independence, and the individual's "right" to respond in kind when dignity is threatened. In ghetto communities, this stigma is even more powerful because—ironically—it is in these enclaves that this mainstream value of independence is most vigorously elaborated and embellished. Film characters, rap stars, and local idols base their claim to notoriety on standing above the crowd, going their own way, being free of the ties that bind ordinary mortals. There are white parallels, to be sure, but this is a powerful genre of icons in the black community, not because it is a disconnected subculture but because it is an intensified version of a perfectly recognizable American middle-class and working-class fixation.

It is therefore noteworthy that thousands upon thousands of minority teens, young adults, and even middle-aged adults line up for jobs that will subject them, at least potentially, to a kind of character assassination. They do so not because they start the job-seeking process with a different set of values, one that can withstand society's contempt for fast food workers. They take these jobs because in so many inner-city communities, there is nothing better in the offing. In general, they have already tried to get better jobs and have failed, landing at the door of Burger Barn as a last resort.

Social stigma has other sources besides the constraints of enforced

*individuality
independence
humor and self*

deference. Money and mobility matter as well. Fast food jobs are invariably minimum-wage positions.⁴ Salaries rise very little over time, even for first-line management. In ghetto areas, where jobs are scarce and the supply of would-be workers chasing them is relatively large, downward pressure on wages keeps these jobs right down at the bottom of the wage scale.⁵

The public perception (fueled by knowledge of wage conditions) is that there is very little potential for improvement in status or responsibility either. Even though there are Horatio Algernons in this industry, there are no myths to prop up a more glorified image. As a result, the epithet "McJob" develops out of the perception that fast food workers are not likely to end up in a prestigious job as a general manager or restaurant owner; they are going to spend their whole lives flipping burgers.

As it happens, this is only half true. The fast food industry is actually very good about internal promotion. Workplace management is nearly always recruited from the ranks of entry-level workers. Carefully planned training programs make it possible for employees to move up, to acquire transferable skills, and to at least take a shot at entrepreneurial ownership. McDonald's, for example, is proud of the fact that half of its board of directors started out as crew members. One couldn't say as much for the rest of the nation's Fortune 500 firms.

However, the vast majority never even get close to management. The typical entry-level worker passes through his or her job in short order, with an industry-average job tenure of less than six months. Since this is an average, it suggests that a large number of employees are there and gone in a matter of weeks. It is this pattern, a planned operation built around low skills and high turnover, that has given fast food jobs such a bad name. In order for the industry to keep functioning with such an unstable labor force, the jobs themselves must be broken down so that each step can be learned, at least at a rudimentary level, in a very short time. A vicious circle develops in which low wages are attached to low skills, encouraging high departure rates. Hence, although it is quite possible to rise above the fray and make a very respectable living as a general manager overseeing a restaurant, most crew members remain at the entry level and leave too soon to see much upward movement. Observing this pattern on such a large scale—in practically every town and city in the country—Americans naturally conclude that one can't get anywhere in a job like this, that there is no real future in it, and that anyone with more "on the ball" wouldn't be caught dead working behind the counter. As I

explain in Chapter 6, mobility isn't necessarily that limited, but since that is not widely known, the negative impression sticks.

The stigma also stems from the low social status of the people who hold these jobs: minorities, teenagers, immigrants who often speak halting English, those with little education, and (increasingly in affluent communities afflicted with labor shortages) the elderly. To the extent that the prestige of a job refracts the social characteristics of its average incumbents, fast food jobs are hobbled by the perception that people with better choices would never purposely opt for a "McJob." Succeeding chapters will show that entry-level jobs of this kind are undeserving of this scorn: more skill, discretion, and responsibility are locked up in a fast food job than is apparent to the public. But this truth hardly matters where public perception is concerned. There is no quicker way to indicate that a person is barely deserving of notice than to point out he or she holds a "chump change" job at Kentucky Fried Chicken or Burger King. We "know" this is the case just by looking at the age, skin color, or educational credentials of the people already on the job: the tautology has a staying power that even the smartest public relations campaign cannot shake.

Ghetto youth are particularly sensitive to the status degradation entailed in stigmatized employment. As Elijah Anderson (in *Streetwise*, University of Chicago Press, 1990) and others have pointed out, a high premium is placed on independence, autonomy, and respect among minority youth in inner-city communities—particularly by young men. No small amount of mayhem is committed every year in the name of injured pride. Hence jobs that routinely demand displays of deference force those who hold them to violate "macho" behavior codes that are central to the definition of teen culture. There are, therefore, considerable social risks involved in seeking a fast food job in the first place, one that the employees and job-seekers are keenly aware of from the very beginning of their search for employment.

It is hard to know the extent to which this stigma discourages young people in places like central Harlem from knocking on the door of a fast food restaurant. It is clear that the other choices aren't much better and that necessity drives thousands, if not millions, of teens and older job-seekers to ignore the stigma or learn to live with it. But no one enters the central Harlem job market without having to face this gauntlet.

Tiffany started working in the underground economy bagging groceries when she was little more than ten years old because her mother was having trouble supporting the family, "checks weren't coming in," and

there was "really a need for food." She graduated to summer youth by the time she was fourteen, but two years later she needed a "real" job that would last beyond the summer, so she set about looking—everywhere. As a young black teenager, she quickly discovered there wasn't a great deal open to her. Tiffany ended up at Burger Barn in the Bronx, a restaurant two blocks from her house and close enough to her high school to make after-school hours feasible.

The first Burger Barn I worked at was because nobody else would take me. It was a last resort. I didn't want to go to [Burger Barn]. You flip burgers. People would laugh at you. In high school, I didn't wanna be in that kind of environment. But lo and behold, after everything else failed, Martin Paints, other jobs, [Burger Barn] was welcoming me with open arms. So I started working there.

Tiffany moved to Harlem when she finished high school, and found she couldn't commute back to the Bronx. Still sensitive to the stigma attaching to her old job, she tried her luck at moving up, out of the fast food business and into a service job with more of a "white-collar" flavor; she looked everywhere for a position in stores where the jobs are free of hamburger grease and hot oil for french fries, stores where clerks don't wear aprons or hairnets. Despite her best efforts, nothing panned out.

I'm looking at Lerner's and Plymouth [clothing stores] and going to all these stores, but nothing is coming through. But [Burger Barn] was waitin' for me because I had two years of experience by then.

The new Burger Barn franchise was right in the middle of Harlem, not far from the room she rents over a storefront church, and it had the additional appeal of being "a black-owned business," something that mattered to Tiffany in terms of the "more cultural reasons why [she] decided to work there." She was glad to land a job, but worried that her high school diploma couldn't take her any farther than this entry-level position. It didn't augur well for the future.

William followed a similar pathway to Burger Barn, graduating from summer youth jobs in the middle of high school and looking for something that would help pay for his books and carfare. The Department of Labor gave him a referral to Burger Barn, but he was reluctant at first to pursue it.

To go there and work for [Burger Barn], that was one of those real cloak-and-dagger kinds of things. You'll be coming out [and your friends say], "Yo, where you going?" You be, "I'm going. don't worry about where I'm going." And you see your friends coming [to the restaurant] and see you working there and now you be, "No, the whole [housing] project gonna know I work in [Burger Barn]." It's not something I personally proclaim with pride and stuff. . . . If you are a crew member, you really aren't shit there. . . . You got nothing there, no benefits, nothing. It was like that [when I was younger] and it's like that now.

William tried every subterfuge he could think of to conceal his job from the kids he knew. He kept his uniform in a bag and put it on in the back of the restaurant so that it would never be visible on the street. He made up fake jobs to explain to his friends where his spending money was coming from. He took circuitous routes to the Barn and hid back by the gigantic freezer when he spotted a friend coming in. The last thing William wanted was to be publicly identified as a shift worker at Burger Barn.

In this he was much like the other teen and young adult workers we encountered. They are very sensitive to stigma, to challenges to their status, and by taking low-wage jobs of this kind they have made themselves vulnerable to exactly the kind of insults they most fear. But the fact is that they do take these risks and, in time, latch on to other "narratives" that undergird their legitimacy.

BREAKING THE STIGMA

One of the chief challenges facing an organization like Burger Barn involves taking people who have come to it on the defensive and turn them into workers who appear at least on the surface to enjoy their work. Customers have choices; they can vote with their feet. If ordering french fries at Burger Barn requires them to put up with rudeness or indifference from the person who takes their order, they can easily cross the street to a competitor the next time. It is clearly in the company's interest to find ways to turn the situation around. Ideally, from the industry's viewpoint, it would be best if the whole reputation of these jobs could be reversed. This is what McDonald's had in mind when it launched the Calvin series. But for all the reasons outlined earlier in this chapter, this probably won't come to pass, since the conditions that give rise to the stigma in the first place—low wages, high turnover, enforced deference—

are not likely to change. Beyond publicizing the opportunities that are within reach, much of which falls on deaf ears, there is little the industry can do to rehabilitate its workers in the eyes of the public and thereby reduce the tension across the counter.

Yet behind the scenes, managers and workers and peers working together in restaurant crews do build a moral defense of their work. They call upon timeless American values to undergird their respectability. Pointing to the essential virtues of the gainfully employed, Burger Barn workers align themselves with the great mass of men and women who work for a living. "We are like them," they declare, and in so doing they separate themselves from the people in their midst who are not employed. And they have plenty of experience of individuals who don't work, often including members of their own families. They see beggars come around the restaurants looking for handouts every day; fast-talkers who walk into Burger Barn hoping for free food; agemates who prefer to deal drugs. In general, these low-wage workers are far less forgiving, far less tolerant, of these "losers" than are many liberal writers. Since they hold hard, poorly paid jobs, people like Kyesha or Jamal see little reason why anyone else ought to get a free ride. What the indigent should do is to follow their example: get a job, any job.

Ianna is an articulate case in point. She has had to confront the social degradation that comes from holding a "low job" and has developed a tough hide in response. Her dignity is underwritten by the critique she has absorbed about the "welfare-dependent":

I'm not ashamed because I have a job. Most people don't, and I'm proud of myself that I decided to get up and do something at an early age. So as I look at it, I'm not on welfare. I'm doing something.

I'm not knocking welfare, but I know people that are on it that can get up and work. There's nothing wrong with them. And they just choose not to. . . . They don't really need to be on [welfare]. They just want it because they can get away with it. I don't think it's right, because that's my tax dollars going for somebody who is lazy, who don't wanna get up. I can see if a woman had three children, her husband left her, and she don't have no job 'cause she was a housewife. Okay. But after a while, you know, welfare will send you to school. Be a nurse assistant, a home attendant, something!

Even if you were on welfare, it should be like, you see all these dirty streets we have? Why can't they go out and sweep the streets, clean up the parks? I mean, there is so much stuff that needs to be done in this city.

They can do that and give them their money. Not just sit home and not do anything.

Patricia, a mother of five children in her late thirties, has worked at Burger Barn for five years. She moved up to New York from Tennessee after her husband walked out on her, hoping to find more job opportunities than were available in the rural South. It took a long time for Patty to get on her feet; during the time she was really desperate, she turned to the welfare system to put food on the table. Eventually she broke free of her heavy-handed caseworker and landed her Burger Barn job. Given this background, one imagines Patty would be tolerant of AFDC recipients. After all, she has been there. Not so. Having finally taken the hard road to a real job, she sees no reason why anyone else should have an easier ride.

There's so much in this city; it's always hiring. It may not be what you want. It may not be the pay you want. But you will always get a job. If I can work at Burger Barn all week and come home tired and then have to deal with the kids and all of that, and be happy with one twenty-five a week, so can you. Why would I give quarters [to bums on the street]? My quarter is tax-free money for you! No way.

Or, in a variation on the same theme, Larry reminds us that any job is better than no job. The kids who dare to hard-time Larry get nothing but a cold shoulder in return, because he knows deep down that he has something they don't have: work for which he gets paid.

I don't care what other people think. You know, I just do not care. I have a job, you know. It's my job. You ain't puttin' no food on my table; you ain't puttin' no clothes on my back. I will walk tall with my Burger Barn uniform on. Be proud of it, you know.

Danielle is a little less confident, and allows that she doesn't advertise the nature of her job by wearing her uniform on the street. But she agrees with Larry that what is most important is that you work at all. What a person does for a living is less critical than willingness and ability to find and keep a job of any kind.

Regardless of what kind of work you do, you still can be respected. Ain't saying I'm ashamed of my job, but I wouldn't walk down the street

wearing the uniform. . . . Guys know you work there will say, "Hi, Burger Barn." I ain't gonna lie and say I'm not ashamed, period. But I'm proud that I'm working. You know, my daughter's father . . . used to grab pigs and clean pigs all day. But he was respected for his job. I respected him because he worked, regardless of what kind of work it was. He got laid off a better job, and that was the only job he could find at the time. So he took it, and I respect him for that. Anybody who could work any kind of job should be respected. Because they was getting that money honestly. They don't have to go out there and get it illegal.

These conservative views trade on a sentiment shared by the working poor and the working class: work equals dignity and no one deserves a free ride. Of course, this means more coming from people who have stood on their feet for eight or nine hours at a stretch for the minimum wage. Virtually all they have to show for their trouble is the self-respect that comes from being on the right side of the chasm that separates the deserving (read "working") and the undeserving (read "nonworking") poor.

Other retorts to status insults are possible as well. Flaunting financial independence often provides a way of lashing back at acquaintances who deride young workers for taking jobs at Burger Barn. Brian, born in Jamaica but raised in some of Harlem's tougher neighborhoods, knows that his peers don't think much of his job. "They would just make fun," he says. "Ah, you flipping burgers. You gettin' paid four twenty-five." They'd go snickering down the street." But it wasn't long after Brian started working that he piled up some serious money, and everyone around him knew it.

What I did was make Sam [the general manager] save my money for me. Then I got the best of clothes and the best sneakers with my own money. Then I added two chains. Then [my friends] were like, "Where you selling drugs at?" and I'm like, "The same place you said making fun of me, flipping burgers. That's where I'm getting my money from. Now, where are you getting yours from?" They couldn't answer.

Media attention given to the glamour of the drug trade suggests that it is an attractive magnet for kids who need money. But the young adults we met in Harlem are frightened of the drug lords and want to stay as far away from their business as possible. They know too many people who

are dead, in jail, or permanently disabled from the ravages of drugs. Kyesha explained:

People like to down me, like this job wasn't anything, like it was a low job. Like selling drugs was better than working at fast foods. But I was like, "Nah." I never went that way, toward drugs, so I'm just gonna stick to what I do. Now they locked up, and I don't think I'm gonna get locked up for selling hamburgers and french fries!

If you aren't willing to join the underground economy, where are you going to get the money to dress yourself, go out on the town, and do the other things-teenage throughout the middle class do on Mom and Dad's sufferance? Harlem families cannot provide it. That leaves the youth themselves to earn the cash to support their lifestyle, a primary force pushing them to find jobs. A young man like Brian can remain a player in the local social scene by supporting his consumer needs with a job. He takes no small amount of pleasure outdoing his friends on style grounds they value as much as he does.

It might be comforting to believe that these hardworking, low-wage workers were, from the very beginning, different from their non-working counterparts, equipped somehow to withstand the gauntlet of criticism that comes their way when they start out on the bottom of the labor market. It would be comforting because we would then be able to sort the admirable poor (who recognize the fundamental value of work and are willing to ignore stigma) from the rest (who collapse in the face of peer pressure and therefore prefer to go on the dole). This is simplistic. Burger Barn workers of all ages and colors have been the butt of jokes and the target of ridicule. Some, like Jamal, claim they don't care what other people think, but when you get to know them personally, they will admit that it took a long time, a lot of swallowed pride, to build up this confidence. The sting of public criticism did get to them.

How, then, did they manage to develop the backbone it takes to stay the course in a stigmatized job? How do ghetto residents develop the rejoinders that make it possible to recapture their dignity in the face of social disapproval? To some degree, they can call on widely accepted American values that honor working people, values that "float" in the culture at large.⁶ But this is not enough to construct a positive identity when the reminders of low status—coming from customers, friends, and

culture
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who's making it

subculture + mobility

distinction

the media—are relentless. Something stronger is required: a workplace culture that actively functions to overcome the negatives by reinforcing the value of the work ethic. Managers and veteran employees play a critical role in the reinforcement process. Together they create a cocoonlike atmosphere in the back of the restaurant where they counsel new workers distressed by bad-mouthing.

Kimberly, a twenty-year-old African-American woman, began working at Burger Barn when she was sixteen and discovered firsthand how her “friends” would turn on her for taking a low-wage job. Fortunately, she found a good friend at work who steadied her with a piece of advice:

Say it's a job. You are making money. Right? Don't care what nobody say. You know? If they don't like it, too bad. They sitting on the corner doing what they are doing. You got to work making money. You know? Don't bother with what anybody has to say about it.

Kim's friend and adviser, a Burger Barn veteran who had long since come to terms with the insults of his peers, called upon a general status hierarchy that places the working above the nonworking as a bulwark against the slights. The advice Kim gleaned from her friend and her manager made a big difference in helping her to see that she deserves her dignity.

Kids come in here . . . they don't have enough money. I'll be like, “You don't have enough money; you can't get [the food you ordered].” One night this little boy came in there and cursed me out. He [said], “That's why you are working at [Burger Barn]. You can't get a better job . . .” I was upset and everything. I started crying. [My manager] was like, “Kim, don't bother with him. I'm saying, you got a job. You know. It is a job.”

Immigrants who have taken jobs in central Harlem are particularly in need of a defense against character assassination, because they are targets for the ire of African-Americans who resent their presence in a community with an insufficient number of jobs to go around. Ana, a native of Ecuador, had a very difficult time when she first began working as a hostess at Burger Barn. A pretty, petite nineteen-year-old, she was selected for the job because she has a sparkle and vivaciousness that any restaurant manager would want customers to see. But some of her more antagonistic black customers seemed to see her as an archetype: the immigrant who

barely speaks a word of English and snaps up a job they may have tried to get themselves. Without the support of her bilingual Latino manager, she would not have been able to pull herself together and get on with the work.

I wasn't sent to the grill or the fries [where you don't need to communicate with customers]. I was sent to the cash register, even though the managers knew I couldn't speak English. That was only one week after my arrival in the U.S.! So I wasn't feeling very well at all. Black people were cursing me out, saying I shouldn't have that job. Thank God, three weeks later I met a manager who was Puerto Rican. He was my salvation. He told me, “Ana, it's not that bad.” He'd speak to me in English, even though he knows Spanish. He'd tell me, “Don't cry. Dry off those tears. You'll be all right, you'll make it.” So he encouraged me like no other person in that Burger Barn, especially when the customers would curse at me for not knowing English. He gave me courage, and after that it went much better.

Among the things this manager taught Ana was that she should never listen to people who give her a hard time about holding a job at Burger Barn. Having been a white-collar clerical worker in her native country, Ana was unhappy that she had slipped down the status hierarchy—and she still is. She was grateful to have a way to earn money, and her family was desperate for her contribution. But when customers insulted her, insinuating that someone who spoke limited English was barely worthy of notice, she turned to management for help. And she found it in the form of fellow Latino bosses who told her to hold her head up because she was, after all, working, while her critics, on the whole, were not.

With this moral armor in hand, Burger Barn workers often take the process of carving an honored identity one step further: they argue their jobs have hidden virtues that make them more valuable than most people credit. Tiffany decided in the end that there was more substance to her job than she initially believed:

When I got in there, I realized it's not what people think. It's a lot more to it than flipping burgers. It's a real system of business. That's when I really got to see a big corporation at play. I mean, one part of it, the foundation of it. Cashiers. The store, how it's run. Production of food, crew workers, service. Things of that nature. That's when I really got into it and understood a lot more.

Americans tend to think of values as embedded in individuals, transmitted through families, and occasionally reinforced by media images or role models. We tend not to focus on the powerful contribution that institutions and organizations make to the creation and sustenance of beliefs. Yet it is clear that the workplace itself is a major force in the creation of a "rebuttal culture" among these workers. Without this haven of the fellow-stigmatized, it would be very hard for Burger Barn employees to retain their dignity. With this support, however, they are able to hold their heads up, not by defining themselves as separate from society, but by calling upon their commonality with the rest of the working world.

This is but one of the reasons why exclusion from the society of the employed is such a devastating source of social isolation. We could hand people money, as various guaranteed-income plans of the past thirty years have suggested. But we can't hand out honor. Honor comes from participation in this central setting in our culture and from the positive identity it confers.

Roosevelt understood this during the Great Depression and responded with the creation of thousands of publicly funded jobs designed to put people to work building the national parks, the railway stations, the great highways that crisscross the country, and the murals that decorate public walls from San Francisco to New York. Social scientists studying the unemployed in the 1930s showed that people who held WPA jobs were far happier and healthier than those who were on the dole, even when their incomes did not differ significantly.⁷ WPA workers had their dignity in the midst of poverty; those on the dole were vilified and could not justify their existence or find an effective cultural rationale for the support they received.

This historical example has its powerful parallels in the present. Joining the workforce is a fundamental, transformative experience that moves people across barriers of subculture, race, gender, and class. It never completely eradicates these differences, and in some divisive settings it may even reinforce consciousness of them—through glass ceilings, discriminatory promotion policies, and the like. But even in places where pernicious distinctions are maintained, there is another, overarching identity competing with forms that stress difference: a common bond within the organization and across the nation of fellow workers. This is what makes getting a job so much more than a means to a financial end.

NEVER ENOUGH TIME

The acquisition of a mainstream identity as a working stiff is only one of the important changes that befall an inner-city youth who gets a job. He is also likely to experience a sudden shortage of time. Hours that might once have been spent hanging out with friends, relaxing at home, doing schoolwork, or just doing nothing at all suddenly evaporate. Now he has to establish priorities, decide what's important, and face the fact that many pleasurable pastimes have to be sacrificed in favor of earning a living. This is part of the process of joining the adult world that may appear unremarkable to readers who long ago left behind the glories of long summer vacations, lazy weekends, and after-school sports. But for young people first joining the workforce, time binds of this magnitude are a new experience.

For older workers, especially those with families, the bind is even more extreme. They too find they can no longer afford the time to hang out with friends and family who aren't working. Whatever time and energy they have left after the workday is over has to go into taking care of their own children and getting as much rest as they can steal (which is never enough).

Latoya, the twenty-four-year-old first-line manager at Burger Barn, and one of Kyesha's closest friends, worked her way up over a three-year period. The mother of three kids, she has a sister and a cousin who work alongside her at the Barn. All three were known to be heavy partygoers before they started these jobs. These days, the parties are history. The work is too tiring.

My boyfriend thought I was joking. He was like, "[Burger Barn]—how could you be tired? They don't do nothing. All you do is flip burgers!" I'm like, "It's hard. It's really hard work." He sees that some days I come home from work, all I wanna do is just take my shoes off and get in the tub. I wind up sleeping in the tub and have to be woken up, and he be like, "Get to bed!"

So I don't hang out no more. I mean, before I was working I was like, "A party? I'm in there. We goin' to a club? I'm goin'." Now they be like, "A party?" I go to bed at eight o'clock. So [my friends] see that I'm really trying to get into work. So they be like, "Don't mention a party to Latoya. She don't wanna go. She's the working girl."

This is a common refrain among Burger Barn workers. They can no longer keep up with their friends who aren't on such tight schedules.

They are too tired to stay up until two in the morning. It doesn't take long before everyone in the neighborhood knows it, and they find themselves outside the party circles they used to run in. Whatever time they have left outside of their work hours is given over to school, to family obligations, or to blessed sleep.

There is a hidden benefit to these time conflicts. The more workers withdraw from nonworking friends and neighbors, the more the influence of the workplace—its mores, customs, networks, and expectations—shapes them. More and more of their waking hours are spent in structured activities that have real rewards, goals to work toward. Of course, no young person in his or her right mind wants to be a school-and-work robot. The young have to find ways to have fun on the job, to gossip, steal a few minutes to look at a clothes catalog, tease the manager, joke about the rude customers, and chat with the nicer ones. When the workday is done, they have to find a way to sustain a social life, since the intrinsic value of these jobs is not high enough to justify the sacrifice of all pleasure. But given the time these jobs take up, where is that social life to come from?

The twin pressures of holding down a stigmatized job and having to spend a lot of time on it conspire to squeeze a worker's friendship circles, wringing out people in the neighborhood or passing acquaintances from school in favor of fellow workers, especially people from the same workplace. No one likes to be constantly ragged and teased about his or her job and over time will move away from the source of the oppression. The time demands of the job push the same person into the arms of the organizational culture, or at least into the presence of fellow workers. And the similarity of workers' schedules and daily experiences creates a new, natural circle of friends. Over time, then, employees begin to spend many of their leisure hours with one another. When they do go to the clubs, or to movies, or to someone's house for dinner, they are more likely to do so with someone they've come to know from Burger Barn. The more they run with a crowd of fellow workers, the more they think of themselves as belonging to the work world first. Their neighbors, friends from the projects, and acquaintances who don't work begin to take a backseat to work friends.

This is exactly what happened to Kyesha Smith. The more time she put in at work, the less time she had for her old buddies from the projects. At first they badgered her, asking when she was going to spend time with them. She tried to keep them in her daily orbit, but eventually gave up: between school and work she had no time for them. But Kyesha is

gregarious and fun-loving, and when she wanted to go out and have a good time, it was her friends Latoya and Natasha from Burger Barn who became her companions. They hang out together, go to the movies, go shopping on payday, and corral their kids together for the occasional afternoon. Kyesha no longer really has any friends who are not part of the Burger Barn world. That, no doubt, is why she voluntarily turns up at the restaurant on her days off: who else is she going to spend time with?

Rosa is a Dominican student who works in a restaurant in the middle of a Latino neighborhood on Manhattan's far Upper West Side. She lives with her mother and some of her siblings; her father and the rest of the family are still in Santo Domingo, hoping to emigrate in the next few years. Her very first job was at Burger Barn in midtown, a job she held for nine months while she was a junior in high school. She went to school and then commuted down to the business district, worked from 4:00 p.m. until 10:30 at night, and then collapsed. It was hard to fit her homework in, but Rosa soldiered on until she got so tired she quit work. But the pressure to earn money was still there, so she took a job at a children's store in the Bronx and thereafter at a supermarket in the Dominican neighborhood near where she lived.

When that job petered out, Rosa fell back on the experience she had already compiled and found a job at a new Burger Barn that opened in her neighborhood, thus eliminating the commute and putting her in the middle of a business where most of the other workers were Dominicans as well. Rosa found this a fine trollying ground for new friends, but it gradually put some distance between her and the kids she had been hanging out with before.

I like working at Burger Barn because I work with people of my own race. . . . You know, working there we always hang out, we go out together. . . . There is a sense of unity. When we go out, we go out together, the managers, the assistant manager, all of them.

Do you think your circle of friends has changed since you started working at Burger Barn?

Yes, because I have three different kinds of friends. The friends in Santo Domingo. My friends of four years, since I arrived here. And since I started working at Burger Barn, I'm almost always with people from the restaurant. With the guys and the girls. I've neglected my other friends a little; they've gotten jealous.

They said something to you?

Yes. They've told me, "Oh, because you're working there you've forgotten about us."

Tiffany does not like her job. It is a dull routine for her, more of a means to a financial end than anything else. But precisely because the job is no picnic, Tiffany looks to pass the time by having as much fun as she can with friends in the workplace. Over time these joking relations have developed into friendships that transcend the job.

When you get away from the hard, cold business ethos, that "Oh, we have to make money," we can just go with the flow and enjoy what we are doing. Then the job is fun, and you still make money. You make it fun for yourself. Most employees get together pretty often—we get along pretty good. People always have their cliques and remain in them. We do things for entertainment outside the restaurant. I've gone out shopping with some of the girls from the job. We spend time together, maybe a movie, clubs.

For Antonia, who came to New York from Santo Domingo, the possibility of making a social circle out of people from work was a godsend. As a non-English-speaker and a new immigrant, she suffered from an isolation reinforced by her role as a housewife. Few of her friends from the Dominican Republic had moved to the neighborhood where she lived. She knew almost no one and spent the whole day looking after her kids. But her sister and brother, both younger, finally landed jobs at Burger Barn and helped her get one as well. She found plenty of Dominican friends on the shop floor.

I've been working at Burger Barn for a little more than a year now. The best thing that's happened there is that almost all my friends—no, all my friends—are from work. Other than work, I don't have any more friends. I've met everyone I know there.

As time spent in the workplace increases, and the mix of one's social acquaintances shifts toward other employees, work culture comes to dominate the rest of life. The rhythm of the workday, the structure it imposes, the regularity of obligations and expectations, become second nature. Other people depend upon you; an organization requires you, and being on time matters. What recedes from view is the more irregular,

episodic culture of the neighborhood and the streets. Working people gradually leave those less ordered worlds for the more predictable, more demanding, and, in the long run, more rewarding life of a wage earner. This is as true for the long-term fast food worker as it is for the claims processor at an insurance company or a nurse's assistant. There are, of course, more skills, greater future prospects, and certainly more money wrapped up in those other careers. But what all three jobs share is a regular structure, a structure that comes to set the parameters for most other aspects of life—including leisure, family, and time alone.

The dominance of work culture reinforces the division between the working man and woman and those among their acquaintances who do not work. It causes them to pull away from people who don't share their schedules, their problems, and, in time, their way of looking at the world. Indeed, as I have shown earlier, this separation can proceed to the point where workers in some of the most stigmatized occupations (like food service) identify more powerfully with other wage-earners than they do with people they've known for years who are not part of the labor force. And while most of those "nonworking" people are also working in a sense, taking care of little children or elderly people who need them, most fast food workers also know a fair number of people who are embedded in the underground economy as dealers or runners. The further Burger Barn workers sink into their jobs, the more they pull away from the negative elements in their environment and distinguish themselves in every respect from the friends and acquaintances who have taken a wrong turn in life.

Tamara provides a good example of the way in which working youth pull away from the bad apples in their environment as the grip of work culture tightens around them. Tammy grew up in a tough part of Harlem, surrounded by boarded-up row houses and broken glass on the sidewalk. Most of the folks in her neighborhood were looking for work, but relatively few had steady jobs. To have regular employment was to be an object of envy on Tamara's block.

Everybody there, on the block, did not have a job. It was a big thing to have a job, you understand. People would look at me [when I started working at Burger Barn], "Oh! She's goin' out to work!" 'Cause everybody just sat and gossiped about everybody else.

Tammy was one of the lucky ones who did find work, mostly thanks to the intervention of her mother's best friend, who was the manager of a

Burger Barn. Most people in Tamar's neighborhood didn't have these connections and didn't find it so simple to get a job.

Kids on her block looked up to those with money, cars, and nice clothes, people with visible means. Some of them happened to be drug dealers, while others came by their solvency legitimately. Everyone on the block had to choose which means to glory was worthy of admiration. Tamar's own hard work tipped her in the direction of the working man.

Malcolm was one of the people in the neighborhood who had a good job. He owned a game room, owned the building it was in. He drove a nice car and he was building a laundromat next to the game room. That's where I used to sell newspapers. Malcolm always gave to the block. We would come in there sometime, the kids didn't have money, and he'd put quarters in for them. Or one day he'd say, "Giving out free cheeseburgers today." Yes! And you'd come in and get your cheeseburger. He always gave. All of us who grew up, all the girls around my age, he made sure nobody bothered us.

There was also another guy on the block, [Harry], but he was selling drugs. He'd sell a lot of drugs, but he gave to the block too. I mean he gave free bus trips to Great Adventure and everything. He'd come into the game room and put quarters into the machine for everybody.

Malcolm and Harry couldn't stand each other, 'cause one made his way of living selling drugs, but always gave to others and was never stingy with his money. Malcolm was making it legally and he just gave, gave, gave. . . . They would try to outdo each other. People liked both of them, but Harry could do so much more.

Most kids look up to you and wanna be all under [your wing] when you have a lot of money. I tried to get under Malcolm because he was helping me out. Harry, I never tried to be up under him 'cause I knew, I . . . knew something was wrong. 'Cause it's not legal and you can get arrested for it. And I knew at that age. I always looked at him and I'd be like, "What's it like to have that much money." But Malcolm would say, "He may have more money than me, but I make mine legally."

Juan, Kyesha's ex, has had to make the same kinds of choices. Once he secured his Burger Barn job, he had to decide what to do about his friends and acquaintances who operate on the wrong side of the law. Two of his best friends are in jail. Another is dealing drugs and probably isn't far from a jail term himself. What Juan does is try to maintain a cordial rela-

tionship with these guys, but put as much distance between himself and them as he can without giving offense.

This friend of mine is selling and stuff like that, but he's my friend. We used to go to school back then. He was like, "Damn, you still doin' that Burger Barn shit? I can get you a real job!" I think he respects me—at least he don't criticize me behind my back. But I try to avoid him, you know.

Drug dealers are not the only problem cases Harlem workers must contend with. At least until welfare reform began to force women on AFDC into workfare jobs, many young mothers working low-wage jobs were faced with the choice that leads either to a job at a place like Burger Barn or to public assistance. For many, there was no real choice: no matter how much they had internalized the work ethic, the costs of child care and transportation, plus the loss of Medicaid, foreclosed the low-wage job option. Until welfare reform was implemented, AFDC offered greater financial benefits—health coverage, food stamps, and subsidized housing are part of the package⁸—than these jobs provide. Nonetheless, many a young woman opts for the work world instead and sacrifices some of her standard of living in order to live by the mainstream credo.⁹

Patty has been on both sides of the fence. Her experience on the job convinced her that the honor gained has been worth the costs. But she has had to make the conscious choice to pull back from welfare:

I tell the managers, "I'm here 'cause I wanna be." I tell them, "This is no hobby—I'm your best employee." And I felt that way when I told them. I depend on this job. But a year ago, this was a hobby. I mean, I could've easily gone back to public assistance and got two hundred dollars more a month than working in Burger Barn. So I really wanted to be here.

Young people in Harlem are constantly faced with choices, presented with drastically different models of adulthood and asked to decide between them. What getting a job has done for the lucky ones like Tammy or Patty is to reinforce the "right choice." For on the job, young workers are provided moral armor to be used in going "against the flow," opting for the legal, honorable, though poorly paid path in life. They join the fraternity of the minimum-wage worker, who sits at the very bottom of one pyramid—the status system that places professionals, white-collar

workers, and even salespeople in Gap stores above them—and the very top of another—the world of people around them who may be dealing drugs, hanging on the street corner, or suffering the indignities and intrusions of the welfare bureaucracy. The more they adhere to the community of the workplace, the more they separate themselves from the irregular, the excluded, the despised, and cleave to the regular, the accepted, yet stigmatized.

They inhabit this strange "sandwich" world that denies them the prestige which more affluent and educated workers possess, while according them the respect that working people give one another. They can look up at those who have so much more than they do and hope that by dint of their hard work, whatever education they can put together in the future, and the prospect of advancement at Burger Barn, they might someday climb up that ladder. But most end up just staring up that tunnel, because the deck is stacked against upward mobility. And they know that people located above them in the prestige order look down on them as losers, drones who lack the brains to do any better.

Ianna finds these attitudes difficult to endure. Even within Burger Barn, where she expects some regard, she often feels that she is deemed below notice.

It's not that I'm conceited or anything. But I don't use my brain to the capacity I know it can hold, which is dumb. But I'm very smart and they ain't just gonna pay me enough money to do what I know needs to be done. They just couldn't do it. 'Cause, I mean, I'm a loyal worker. If you need me, I'll stay. I'll do anything. It's not so much the money; management just doesn't show the appreciation. . . . As soon as you display some kind of intelligence they look down upon you like, she doesn't know what she's talking about.

Ianna has had enough of being on the bottom of the deck and hopes to get a job as a clerk with a city agency so that her occupation will come closer to the kind of status she thinks she deserves.

William knows what it is to be accorded respect, because he used to have a white-collar job in a brokerage firm downtown. He manned the copy room, doing the photocopying for the lawyers and accountants. He was making good money, he wore a tie to work, and he could hold his head up on his way down the street in Harlem. William moved from there to a big insurance firm, where he worked as a filing clerk, handling

the microfiche, supporting the investigative claims division. Both white-collar jobs paid well, but, more than that, they were jobs with potential for a future. But he made a lot of mistakes, goofed off once too often, flirted with the women on the job, and lost what was then his best chance for a solid future in a decent job. "I was young and didn't realize what I had," he admits. "I had no plan, no sense of responsibility. I never looked at the job and asked where this job can honestly take me."

Moving down to Burger Barn has been a humbling experience. It has taught William about starting anew.

Working at Burger Barn is like, "Yo, you gotta relearn all that stuff all over again." You gotta learn the value of a dollar, learn what it is to be responsible. Learn to appreciate what you got, not just look at it at face value.

But it doesn't make William feel like cheering to know that he has tumbled down to the bottom of the employment system. Nobody hard-times him to his face, but he knows he doesn't carry much weight as a burger flipper. And he feels that he blew it out of his own foolishness, pushed himself down a ladder that society has constructed, a ladder whose validity he fully believes in.

Although scraping the bottom of the employment barrel is no pleasure, Burger Barn workers can look down at all the people who aren't even in the barrel and feel superior to them. Drug dealers, welfare recipients, the hustlers, the jailed and forgotten—these are the people whom the working poor see as occupying the lower rungs of ghetto social organization. Working men and women, no matter how lowly their jobs, can hold their heads up in this company and know that American culture "validates" their claim to social rank above them.

Indeed, some take on an activist or missionary role in an effort to become role models for people in their community who have fallen by the wayside. Rather than leave these acquaintances in the dust, they try to exert some positive influence over them by showing that there is another, more socially acceptable, way of living. Frank, an eighteen-year-old Dominican worker, selects his friends carefully, weeding out those people who are "goin' nowhere." But as Frank sees it, many of the young people around him seem destined for a life of hanging out. Because he can't completely isolate himself from them, he tries to use himself as an example of better values.

cultural
education

who's making it

Neighborhood + Mobility

missionary

Today, a friend of mine told me, "Yeah, I know you busted out on the report card," because they know that I be gettin' good grades and stuff. I told him, "Yeah, I got so-so grades." But I failed one. It was like, "Oh?" Like they'd be shocked. They'd be, "Wow, you didn't do good." And they'd be concerned with why. Because I usually show them [my report card]. I try to be a role model, let them know I'm trying, let them know I'd help them out. I'll say, "Look at my report card . . . where's yours? Why didn't you pass?" I don't say, "Yo, you should do this, you should do that." Because I don't wanna seem like I'm their mother or father.

Like my friend. He used to be real good at school, when we was little, and stuff like that. He used to get awards. Not now, so I'll say, "What happened? You failed three classes. You dropping off. Not doing too good in school." He was, "Naw, it got harder." I was, "You better study, you know. Do what you got to do just to get out." And I see him going now. He is going to summer school and stuff like that.

Larry plays a similar role in his friends' lives. He is struggling to work and finish high school, a combination that is never easy to manage. "Some of my friends think I should just go get my GED," Larry allows. "They think I should take the easy way out." But that is not what he has in mind. "I want to stick in there," Larry says with determination, "and go the whole nine yards." His example has had its effect, though. His friends have started to look at him as the model to follow.

Since they've been around me, they tend to look my way. They look for my advice, they look for my decisions. They look for what I want to go through so they can follow me.

Larry's determination to finish school and continue working has made an impression on his friends and boosted his currency in a neighborhood where many young people do neither. They can sense his resolve, and this they honor.

While taking a fast food job subjects inner-city dwellers to stigma and social rejection, sticking with that job can, in the end, return to them some of the respect that has been lost. For friends, neighbors, and family members understand that it takes real strength of character to stay with something—a job, school, a relationship, almost anything. Sheer duration, coupled with the willingness to buck the tide of local public opinion, conveys a kind of individualistic resolve that is valued. Sean endured

months of ragging by friends who, like him, were in their early twenties but, unlike him, were unwilling to "stoop" to a job like the one he holds at Burger Barn. Eventually they could see he was not about to succumb to the pressure to conform by giving up his job. They began to come around to the view that Sean was something of a real man for sticking to his guns.

I see the people relating to me better. Acknowledging what I've done. Acknowledging how I am doing and how I'm gonna be doing. So this job means a lot to me . . . My friends say it's good. You are doing something. You're working still. You could be out there in the streets.

Many young workers told similar stories. Their friends admit, almost sheepishly, that it takes guts to carry on in the face of so much criticism, that it is important to be persistent and hold a job, almost any job, for a long time. No small number end up asking for help in finding the very same job that they ridiculed a few months earlier.

Here too the power of mainstream ideals is clear. Americans value individualism, running against the tide, the square-jawed hero who stands against the crowd. This is not without ambiguity, for clearly we also place a value on conformity, on membership in communities of the similar. But there is a cultural subtext to which people can refer with pride when they stand alone and fight the base morals of the group. Young adults who accept stigmatized jobs experience the pressures of conformity through the workings of teasing and ostracism. If there are alternative venues to attach themselves to, like a welcoming workplace full of similar outcasts, they may respond by detaching themselves from the problematic crowd and attaching to this more hospitable group. But over the long run, they may find that they can achieve a modicum of acceptance among peers, if not reintegration, by claiming a whole new status: the individualist who stood against local pressure to conform in pursuit of widely respected purposes like working for a living.

Still, the ambiguous social position of the low-wage service worker does not completely satisfy anyone who has it. Claiming a mainstream identity as gainfully employed certainly helps to ward off the stigma that customers, neighbors, agemates, and society at large heap on people who earn very little and are under orders to be subservient. By linking his claim to an honored status as a working person, the low-wage employee pushes back. But he can only push so far, for he soon hits the

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wall, knowing full well that people who wear white collars to work, who don't come home covered with grease, who hang diplomas on their walls, and who can count more zeros on their paychecks than any Burger Barn workers will ever see barely rate them as in the same category. As Ron, a particularly perceptive young black man at Burger Barn, put the matter:

You accept the fact that you're not gonna get rich. You're working, man, but you're still struggling. You're not laid back. You're still humble. . . . What makes it difficult is when you're smart. [Burger Barn] is not for anybody that has any type of brains. . . . You're being overworked and underpaid. You're making somebody else rich. So . . . you really got to brainwash yourself to say, "Well, okay, I'm going to make this guy rich and I'm just happy to be making this little five dollars an hour."

No one navigates this contradiction-filled cultural maze alone, though. Low-wage workers can do so only in the company of others who are similarly positioned "betwixt and between." They learn the cultural defenses against the scorn heaped upon them in the workplace, from concerned managers and veteran workers who have already "been there." The more they participate in this rebuttal culture, the more they are drawn into a social world that revolves around the work ethic, the company of fellow workers, and friendships that reinforce the cocoonlike quality of the low-wage workplace. Ultimately, being a member of this fraternity shifts their identities from kid in the neighborhood to worker, albeit a worker with a complex identity: part admired, part scorned.

INTIMATE TIES

Drawing closer to workmates leads some employees to develop romantic links. There is nothing surprising about this, for beyond one's school years, there are few other sources of new acquaintances than the workplace (or friends of friends). During the two years we spent working around various Burger Barns in Harlem, we saw the birth (and, sadly, the demise) of many romances and a number of marriages.

Although there is nothing remarkable about these ties in and of themselves, they do signal something else quite crucial about the importance of work opportunities for young people. When time binds restrict one's friendship circles to fellow workers, the choice of mates tends to narrow down as well to men and women who are gainfully employed. This has important implications for family formation patterns and for the support of dependent children, in or out of wedlock.

Kyesha Smith and her former partner, Juan, are good examples. Though their relationship did not work out over the long run, the fact that they are both gainfully employed makes a big difference in their capacity to be contributors to their mothers' households and responsible parents of the son they have in common. Because Juan lives with his mother, he does what he can to support her.

Right now I'm living in my mother's place. . . . When I started working, [my family] would be like, "Juan's making his money, so he can start helping out." My mother began asking me for money. "I could use forty dollars" [she'd say]. Whether I was spending money or not, like it was big money. So every week I help my mother out. Fifty dollars a week. She needs help with her bills. She can't be paying all the bills by herself, so she'll ask me for money.

Kyesha is under the same constraint.

Juan contributes regularly to his son's care, bears him in mind in making decisions about his work life, and takes a strong—often controlling—role in determining how he is to be raised in Kyesha's household. Most of all, his having a child means that his Burger Barn job has taken on a whole new meaning. It is now less a stain on his reputation and more a means toward responsible parenthood.

I did the sneakers thing [with my money] for about a year, but right now what's keeping me at [Burger Barn] is that I have a responsibility. I have a son and he needs things too. Now I got to stay there and just take what I got. That's keeping me there. 'Cause there's been times when I've said that I want to leave. There's been times when I don't come in. . . . But then you go to look at the larger part. I got a son. He needs and I need too. You got to stay there until something better comes along.

This is a father speaking, even though he is a father who doesn't live with his son or his son's mother.

What keeps a young man like Juan feeling this degree of responsibility for his child? Since he long ago broke up with Kyesha, it is clearly not his affection for his former girlfriend. What Juan has that so many young men in the ghetto lack is a regular job. It isn't a great job, but it is a steady one that makes it possible for him to "do the right thing." His son's mother also has a real job.

Wrapped inside this one local example is a wealth of cautionary tales

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and some hopeful signs for anyone interested in poverty, out-of-wedlock birth, and the support of children at the bottom of our social system. The first lesson is that young people who have the opportunity to work are more likely to choose partners out of their stable of work friends. Partnerships nurtured in this soil have a greater chance of producing support streams for children than do unemployed parents. Even though wage levels at the bottom of the occupational pyramid are too low to permit most of these partners to establish independent households and regular marriages of the kind familiar to higher-earning families, they are enough to shunt critical earnings toward the support of young children.

Second, it is important to recognize that although Kyesha and Juan had a child out of wedlock, it was their first and last, not their third.¹⁰ Kyesha was twenty years old by the time Anthony was born, a working girl with five years of experience behind her. Juan was twenty-one, also a veteran low-wage worker. Both of them have acquaintances who are now on their second or third child, locked into what is left of the welfare system. By contrast, these two have only one child, neither is on welfare, and they are not teenagers.¹¹

The bad news, though, is that although Kyesha and Juan are both working adults, their combined incomes—\$9 an hour—would not underwrite a decent standard of living if they were living in an autonomous household. Were it not for Dana's access to AFDC and her willingness to assist with child care,¹² either Kyesha or Juan would have to drop out of the labor force. The advent of welfare reform may well unravel this arrangement, but during the time we spent together it was holding fast. Many of the immigrants in the low-wage system manage in the same fashion: their oldest relatives receive SSI, and "work" for the family by taking responsibility for the babies.¹³

One can imagine, of course, a completely different arrangement: higher wages for both, or some form of child care allowance, that would permit young people like Juan and Kyesha some independence from their kin. But such is not the case, hence the structural forces that impinge upon them (coupled with their personal dispositions, of course) lead them into separate households, distributed responsibility for child care, and joint financial contributions buttressed by state support for the care of their child.¹⁴

Above all, however, this case illustrates the critical importance of work opportunities for inner-city youth. Employment brought these two young people together, generated a sense of responsibility that keeps

them involved in the care of their child, provided the wherewithal for them to act as reasonably responsible parents, and gave them something else to focus on besides serial pregnancies. Kyesha has no intention of having more children until she marries, and Juan wants no other responsibilities of this kind, as he has his hands full doing what he can for his son.

Cultivating a sense of responsibility is a cornerstone of American morality vis-à-vis childbearing. If it is impossible to eliminate out-of-wedlock births altogether, we would at least like to encourage, even mandate, responsible parenting. Yet much of the time, our efforts to foster it are limited to moralistic exhortations about sex outside marriage, or punitive efforts to withdraw state support from those who make the mistake of having children they cannot fully support. We rarely read about the importance of work opportunities as a means of cutting down on teenage pregnancy. Young people who work are less likely to have kids before they are ready and are better able to support the ones they do have. They are more inclined to develop precisely the values politicians and frustrated taxpayers want them to have: family values, responsibility, prudence.

They will not do so perfectly, and the expression of these values may take the shape of irregular families (no doubt as long as their jobs are so poorly paid and their benefits nonexistent). But working for a living leads to a closer approximation of these "good" behaviors than does a life on the dole, or a life spent searching for jobs that do not exist in communities where people want to work precisely so they can be the responsible parents everyone else urges them to become.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOING TO WORK

Although having a meaningful, respected career is prized above all else in the United States, our culture confers honor on those who hold down jobs of any kind over those who are outside of the labor force. Independence and self-sufficiency—these are virtues that have no equal in this society. But there are other reasons why we value workers besides the fact that their earnings keep them above water and therefore less in need of help from government, communities, or charities. We also value workers because they share certain common views, experiences, and expectations. The work ethic is more than an attitude toward earning money—it is a disciplined existence, a social life woven around the workplace.

For all the talk of "family values," we know that in the contemporary period, family takes a backseat to the requirements of the job, even when

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the job involves flipping burgers. We are supposed to orient primarily toward the workplace and its demands. This point could not have been made more forcefully than it was in the context of the welfare reform bills of 1996. Where once Americans expected women to stay home to raise children and were critical of those who didn't, public policy in the late 1990s makes clear that women are now supposed to be employed even if they have young children. With the vast majority of women with children—even children under a year of age—in the labor force, we are not prepared to “cut much slack” for those who have been on welfare. They can and should work “like the rest of us,” or so the policy mantra goes. This represents no small change in the space of a few decades in our views of what honorable women and mothers should do.¹⁵ But it also reflects the growing dominance of work in our understanding of adult priorities.

We could attribute this increasingly work-centered view of life as a reflection of America's uneven economic history in the late twentieth century, a pragmatic response to wage stagnation, downsizing, and international competition: we must work harder. It is also part of a secular transformation that has been going on for decades as the United States has moved away from a home-centered agrarian economy to employment-centered lives outside the domestic sphere altogether. The more work departs from home, the more it becomes a social system of its own, a primary form of integration that rivals the family as a source of identity, belonging, and friendship.¹⁶ Women like Kyesha no longer feel content to take care of children at home, bereft of adult friends. They want a life that is adult-centered, where they have peers they can talk to. Where they might once have found that company in the neighborhood, now they are more likely to find it in the workplace. Those primary social ties are grounded in workplace relations, hence to be a worker is also to be integrated into a meaningful community of fellow workers, the community that increasingly becomes the source of personal friends, intimate relations, and the worldview that comes with them.

Work is therefore much more than a means to a financial end. This is particularly the case when the job holds little intrinsic satisfaction. Those who get paid for boiling french fries in hot oil do not think they are performing a world-shattering role. They know their jobs are poorly valued; they can see that in their paychecks and in the tone of voice of the people whom they serve across the counter. But what they have that their non-working counterparts lack is both the dignity of being employed and the

opportunity to participate in social activities that increasingly define their adult lives. This community gives their lives structure and purpose, humor and pleasure, support and understanding in hard times, and a backstop that extends beyond the instrumental purposes of a fast food restaurant.

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