bound, school-age boys learn to enforce the misogyny of street culture through gang rape.

Kindergarten Delinquencies: Confronting Cultural Capital

Most elementary school teachers assert that up through second grade, the majority of their students desperately want to please their teachers, even when they are prone to acting out their personal problems in the classroom. Primo’s and Caesar’s very first school memories, however, are overwhelmingly negative.

Primo: I hated school. I just hated it. I used to fuck up all the time in school. I never did homework in my life. I just didn’t want to do it.

From first grade to my last year that I dropped out, I only did two or three homeworks.

Never in my life did I do homework. Never!

Primo’s institutional alienation was compounded by the cultural and generational gap that had destabilized the traditional power relations of his household. His monolingual Spanish immigrant single mother was embroiled in a cultural confrontation with her New York City–born toddlers, whose very first delinquency was to refuse to answer her in Spanish.1 Her children’s enrollment in kindergarten exacerbated this crisis. Following the insights of Bourdieu, if forms of cultural interaction — and literacy, more specifically — are the basis for the “symbolic capital” that structures power in any given society, then one can understand from the perspective of a new-immigrant mother and her second-generation progeny the trauma of first contact with the public school system.

The inability of Primo’s mother to speak English and her limited literacy skills were a recipe for institutional disaster in her very first opening-day interactions with her kindergarten child’s homeroom teacher. No precocious, healthy five- or six-year-olds can stand witnessing the instantaneous transformation of the mother — the authority figure in their lives — into an intimidated object of ridicule. Worse yet, over the next few years, this hostile, alien institution proves itself to be much
more powerful in determining one's future fate than all of a mother's caresses, criticisms, or beatings.

In his kindergarten homeroom, Primo inherited the instantaneous onus of his mother's identity as former rural plantation worker, and now new-immigrant inner-city sweatshop employee. Her functional illiteracy and her inability to communicate with the educational bureaucracy condemned Primo to appear uncooperative and slow-witted to his teachers. Perhaps right away he had to protect himself by resisting his teachers lest they unconsciously insult or hurt him should he make the mistake of trying to please them — and inevitably failing. Despite his anxious mother's admonishments that he respect his teacher and do well in school, success in the classroom would have betrayed his love for her.

Theorists working at the intersection of the fields of education, anthropology, and sociology have built a body of literature — sometimes called cultural production theory — to document the way teachers unconsciously process subliminal class and cultural messages to hierarchize their students. Tangible markers like accent and clothing combine with subtler forms of expression such as eye contact, body language, play styles, and attention spans to persuade the agents of a mainstream, middle-class, white-dominated bureaucracy that a particular child is a disciplinary problem, emotionally disturbed, or of low intelligence. Imagine how Primo must have looked to his teachers by second grade:

**Primo**: I never wanted to do nothing in class. I never raised my hand. I would just sit there.

I used to wanta really hide. I was really a shy kid, like, sitting in the back of the class and like, "Leave me alone."

So I started drawing — my whole table was all decorated — like graffiti.

Sometimes I used to feel fucked up and just started making noises. They'd throw me out of class.

But when the citywide test'es used to come, I would pass them.

Primo's behavior and demeanor in the classroom inspired the symbolic judgments of his teachers and peers that on a macrolevel constitute the glue that maintains class and economic inequality in any given society. I have already occasionally referred to the exclusionary power of cultural capital — for example, the inability of Ray, the semiliterate head of the
franchise of crack houses I frequented, to obtain a driver’s license, or, more important, Primo, Caesar, or Leroy’s experiences of disrespect in high-rise office corridors – but it is in school that the full force of middle-class society’s definitions of appropriate cultural capital and symbolic violence comes crashing down on a working-class Puerto Rican child.

Primo: When the teacher used to dish me for talking a lot, or not paying attention, I’d probably curse the shit out of her.
Like if she said, “Shut up!” or something. I’d say, “Fuck you asshole!”

Caesar’s delinquent status was almost physical in its immediacy.

Caesar: The teachers used to hate me. They used to say, “He’s big and mean.” And I used to be the class clown.
I was wild. I was a delinquent. [laughing]

The enforcement at school of the symbolic parameters of social power is an unconscious process for everyone involved. It poisons the most intimate facets of a vulnerable child’s life. For example, when Primo achieved minimal literacy and an understanding of grade school conventions, he was able to manipulate the system against his mother and betray her trust. The normal channels of mother–child authority were subverted. She lashed back at him helplessly with beatings, anger, and distrust.

Primo: My whole first-grade notebook was marked red. And my mother had to sign anyway. I never used to tell her nothing about why it was red so that she would sign it.
Then the teachers told her about the red, and she went like, “AAAAAAGGH!” [flailing both arms in rage]
So then I used to draw a lot, and I was always tracing things, so when they wrote her a letter about my homeworks that she was supposed to sign, I just traced her signature right over where it was supposed to be.
I was a kid. I was probably like my son Papito, six or seven years old, yeah that’s second grade.
Primo’s elementary school resistance escalated into truancy, petty crime, and substance abuse as he reached pubescence. His mother tried to save her son by sending him to live with her parents in Arroyo, the same Puerto Rican plantation community where she had grown up. Primo moved into his grandparents’ household in the newly constructed federal housing projects on the edge of the sugar plantation owned by a U.S. multinational corporation, which at one time had employed his grandfather and all of his uncles and great-uncles. His mother’s desperate attempt to compensate for her child’s traumatic experiences in the U.S. inner city backfired. Fourteen-year-old Primo became a legal truant in Puerto Rico when the East Harlem school district failed to forward his papers. More devastating, however, from a psychological developmental perspective, the rural plantation community of Primo’s grandparents immediately rejected him. Puerto Ricans born and raised on the Island are acutely aware of the breakdown of community and social control among return emigrants, and Nuyoricans are generally distrusted. Primo discovered that he straddled two cultures – both of which rejected him.\(^2\) Rural Puerto Rico confronted him with the classic uprooting experience faced by the adolescent children of immigrants whose dreams of upward mobility and full citizenship have been crushed in segregated inner cities.

*Primo:* [sipping beer] My mother sent me to P.R. when I was fourteen, because I was fucking up out here [waving out the Game Room window].

I was just a kid, and so were the girls I was trying to get next to. They would stand far away from me, like from here to the other side of the room. Like they was scared.

I had never met their fathers, but still they used to speak to me, “No te puedo hablar mucho, porque mi papá no quiere.” [I can’t talk to you much, because my father doesn’t want me to.]

And I would say, “Who’s your Father?” thinking like I met him already, and he don’t like me.

But they had just been warned about me. You see, in those small towns news spreads like this [snapping his fingers], and ‘cause somebody’s from Nueva York he’s probably fresco [oversexed].

*Caesar:* Yeah, that happened to me too. Puerto Rico is wack. I
School Days

done went plenty of times too. They don’t really like Puerto Ricans from New York. They call us “gringos.” They say people from New York are like slicker, wilder. [grinning and wiggling his finger] Manipulative.

They try to say, “You be coming here and trying to make us look like hicks and shit.” You know, like jíbaros.

You gotta be careful in Puerto Rico or you be getting into problems.

Primo: Yeah, I fucked up over there too.

I mean I’m a real condenado’ [damned person]. With my cousin we stole five hundred dollars from my grandmother who was selling lottery tickets. We just went into her purse in her room. And that woman [morosely lowering his head], she loved me.

Her husband caught us and gave us a beating. So it was back to New York for me.

Violence: Family and Institutional

Caesar’s school experiences were more profoundly violent and negative than Primo’s. Like Primo, he is the son of a woman who immigrated as a teenager, but Caesar’s mother came from an urban shantytown rather than a rural plantation village, and she was more literate and acculturated. This translated into even more violent personal disruptions in her life: serial teenage pregnancies with different men, heroin addiction, petty crime, and eventually murder and incarceration. Hence, the personal and institutional discontinuities and hostilities in Caesar’s life.

Caesar: I wasn’t that dumb in school. I was violent. The only reason I came out wild is because . . . I didn’t have no guidance.

I’m the oldest. I had no pops, nor mom. I mean, my mother used to live with me a little bit, but I was always with my grandmother.

My moms was all over the place. She was only sixteen when she had me. She was like a beauty queen in P.R. at the time, and she got a lot of raps. My pops was young, he was about twenty.

She also used to sniff coke and dope, and drink. My mother, she had problems, man.

I mean she couldn’t take care of me because she was taking care