“Dummy Smart”

Misrecognition, Acting Out, and “Going Dumb”

In attempting to maintain the existing order, the powerful commit crimes of control. . . . At the same time, oppressed people engage in . . . crimes of resistance.

—Meda Chesney-Lind and Randall G. Shelden, Girls, Delinquency, and Juvenile Justice, 1992

It’s a war going on
The ghetto is a cage
They only give you two choices
Be a rebel or a slave

—Dead Prez, “Turn off the Radio,” 2002

Ronny was called in for a job interview at Carrows, a chain restaurant that served $9.99 sirloin steak and shrimp. He called me up, asking for help. I lent him a crisp white dress shirt, which I had purchased at a discount store when I worked as a server at a steak house during my undergraduate years. I convinced Ronny to wear fitted khakis, rather than his customary baggy jeans. He agreed, with the condition that he would wear his white Nike Air Force Ones, a popular basketball shoe at the time. These shoes had been in and out of style in the urban setting since the early 1980s. By 2002, a famous
rapper, Nelly, created a popular song named “Air Force Ones.” Around this
time, famous basketball players such as Kobe Bryant wore these shoes dur-
ing games and advertised for Nike. Black and Latino youths in Oakland
gravitated to these shoes, sometimes even wearing them to more formal
events such as high school proms, quinceañeras (coming-of-age parties for
girls turning fifteen, celebrated in many Latino cultures), and weddings. I
asked Ronny why he insisted on wearing these shoes in a professional set-
ting. He replied, “Because professionals wear them.”

Many of the boys believed that they had a clear sense of what cour-
teous, professional, and “good” behavior was. Despite their attempts to
present themselves with good manners and good morals, their idea of
professional behavior did not match mainstream ideas of professional
behavior. This in turn created what I refer to as misrecognition. When the
boys displayed a genuine interest in “going legit,” getting a job or doing
well in school, adults often could not recognize their positive attempts
and sometimes interpreted them as rude or malicious acts and therefore
criminalized them.

The boys had grown up in an environment which had deprived them
of the social and cultural capital that they needed to progress in school
and the labor market. Therefore, they developed their own alternative
social and cultural capital, which they used to survive poverty, persist in
a violent and punitive social ecology, prevent violence, avoid incarcera-
tion, and attempt to fit into mainstream institutions. Borrowing from phi-
losopher Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “organic intellectuals”2—those
individuals who come from the marginalized conditions that they write
about and study—I call the creative social and cultural capital that the
boys developed in response to being prevented from acquiring capital
to succeed in mainstream institutions organic capital. This organic capi-
tal was often misunderstood and misrecognized by mainstream institu-
tions and was, in turn, criminalized. On the other hand, young people
often used organic capital as a resilience strategy that allowed them to
persist through neglect and exclusionary experiences. Education scholar
Tara Yosso develops a framework for understanding and using the capi-
tal that marginalized communities develop, what she calls “community
Cultural wealth.”3 She argues that marginalized communities have always
generated certain kinds of capital that have allowed them to survive and
resist. Sociologist Martín Sánchez-Jankowski has recently discussed poor people’s ability to organize their social world and maintain social order as “persistence.” According to Sánchez-Jankowski, contrary to the popular academic belief that poor people live in a disorganized world where they have a limited capacity to generate “collective efficacy”—the ability of a community to solve its own social problems—the urban poor shape their behaviors around making sense of and creating social order within a marginal context. Organic capital is the creative response that the boys in this study developed in the midst of blocked opportunity and criminalization. However, these creative responses, despite being well intentioned, were often not well received by mainstream institutions.

The paradox that these marginalized young people faced was that the organic capital that they developed to negotiate conflict and organize their survival on the streets often did not translate well in a school or labor-market setting. Criminologist Yasser Payne argues that some marginalized Black youths, who have been excluded from mainstream institutions, find affirmation, fulfillment, and resilience in practices associated with street life. These practices, according to Payne, provide young men with “sites of resilience,” spaces where they feel empowered and affirmed. Some boys in this study wholeheartedly believed that they were making a formidable attempt to tap into mainstream institutions, using every possible resource to do so, but, in return, they would often receive negative responses.

The boys attempted to use the resilience skills they had learned on the streets, their organic capital, in spaces that could not value the respectability and morals that they brought to the table. These morals and values were often rendered deviant, and the boys were excluded or criminalized. One of their responses was to manifest a resistance to this perceived exclusion and criminalization, a stance that could place value on their self-developed survival skills. This resistance developed in the form of deviance, “irrational behavior,” breaking rules, or committing crime. The resistance became more methodical for some of the boys, as they turned to more formal ways of organizing and resisting punitive social control.

Ronny’s story is indicative of how many of the boys attempted to tap into mainstream institutions but failed. As they encountered rejection, they returned to the resilience and survival strategies that they had
developed in their neighborhoods. I continued to prepare Ronny for his interview, to help him develop “acceptable” cultural capital. We prepared for the interview with some mock questions. “Why do you want to work for us?” I asked him. He responded, “I am a hard worker.” “That’s a good start,” I said. “How about expanding that and telling them that you’re also a team player and that you enjoy the restaurant atmosphere?” Ronny nodded. The day of the interview, I walked into the restaurant separately from Ronny. To calm his nerves I told him, “You look great, man. This job is yours!” He looked sharp: a professionally dressed, athletically built, charismatic, tall, African American young man with a charming dimple on his face every time he smiled. I was certain he would get the job. I sat down for lunch at a booth, in an attempt to observe Ronny being interviewed. I looked at the menu and, with a knot in my gut, nervous for Ronny, ordered what I knew would eventually give me a stomachache: a Mile-High Chipotle Southwest Burger. I sat about twenty feet away from the table where Ronny had been asked to wait. A manager appeared and sat with him. Ronny tried to use his charisma to connect with the manager, but she kept her distance and did not look at Ronny the entire time he answered questions, seemingly uninterested in what he had to say. At the end of the interview, Ronny abruptly stood up and walked away from the manager, with no handshake or smile. He went outside. I ordered my burger to go, paid my bill, and met him in the parking lot. As I headed to the door, I turned to look in the manager’s direction, and she was greeting a White male youth. She smiled, gave him her hand, and offered him a place to sit down. Ronny’s first contact with her was not this friendly. I walked outside to meet Ronny, who sat on the hood of my car.

I asked Ronny to give me a debriefing. He told me that he had a good feeling and that the manager had seemed to like him. I asked him to walk me through the interview. He had followed the plan flawlessly. I was proud of him. “You followed the plan. You did a great job,” I told him. “Why didn’t you shake her hand when you left?” I asked. “Cause,” Ronny replied. “Why not?” I scolded. “Because it was a White lady. You not supposed to shake a White lady’s hand. They be scared of a nigga. They think I’m a try to take their shit or fuck ‘em. I just said thanks and walked out.” Ronny did not get the job.
Ronny had been socialized from a young age, according to him, by his White female teachers to overcompensate around White women and to go the extra mile to show that he was not attempting to harm or disrespect them. This behavior may have been a result of the stereotyped expectations of Black men as criminals and sexual aggressors, which is deeply rooted in American culture and which Ronny had to contend with as a young Black man. The history of lynching and hate crimes against Black men in the United States has often been the result of accusations of attacks by Black men on White women, a fact well documented by historians. It seemed that the longue-durée idea that Black males are a threat to White females had become embedded in the socialization of Black boys in Oakland.

Ronny did all he could to land the job, but the limited resources that he had at his disposal for showing respect may have kept him from getting the position. In this case, he believed that not shaking the manager’s hand would show respect; instead, Ronny may have been perceived as a rude kid not able to hold employment in a restaurant environment. I asked Ronny to tell me how he learned about not shaking White women’s hands. He told me that White teachers and White women in public had always been intimidated by him. His White female teachers had asked him to keep his distance from them, White women on the street would clasp their purses when they saw him walking by, and White female store clerks would nervously watch him when he walked into an establishment.

Anthropologist Philippe Bourgois found that poor Puerto Rican young men living in New York had a difficult time making it in the labor market because of the cultural collision that took place. He showed that corporate culture was organized around humiliating low-skilled workers and that these workers were supposed to tolerate this hazing process until they were able to move up the corporate ladder. The boys in his study came from a world where they gave and expected respect and honor. This conflict led young men to become isolated and forced them out of work. Similarly, I found that the boys in my study organized their worlds around dignity, respect, and empathic treatment (among friends and homies). Tyrell’s comment is representative: “My little Gs [friends] all respect me, watch my back, and give me love. They’s all I got.” The boys often found themselves fighting for dignity. They constantly worked at feeling worthy of honor and respect from the institutions they interacted with. This dig-
nity work often led them to fall further into criminalization and, in turn, impacted their ability to effectuate social mobility or to remain free.

Ronny applied for multiple jobs. After about a dozen applications and three failed interviews, he became discouraged. He reported being asked by other managers about his “drug habits” and “criminal background.” Ronny decided to abandon the job-search process and instead invested twenty dollars in pirated DVDs; a few hours later, he made fifty dollars from the illegally copied movies. He reinvested the fifty dollars in a backpack full of pirated DVDs. After a few weeks, Ronny made enough to buy a few new pairs of glossy Nike Air Force One tennis shoes. However, the six to ten hours that he spent in front of Albertson’s grocery store, waiting for customers for his DVDs, made him a measly twenty to thirty dollars a day—certainly not worth the risk of getting arrested for a federal offense, the classification that DVD pirating receives in the United States.

Still, Ronny preferred to take on the risk of incarceration and the low wages that this underground entrepreneurship granted him, in order to avoid the stigma, shame, and feeling of failure that the job-application process produced for him. This feeling the young men had of being racially stigmatized and being punished for their well-intended actions made some of them reject the mainstream job-application process and develop their own underground economies. Misrecognition of genuine attempts to do well in school, the labor market, or their probation program led many of the boys to grow frustrated and to produce alternatives in which their organic capital could be put to productive use.

Resistance Identities

Resistance identities, according to sociologist Manuel Castells, are those identities created by subordinated populations in response to oppression. These identities operate by “excluding the excluder.” In feeling excluded from a network of positive credentials, education, and employment opportunities, young people develop creative responses that provide them with the necessary tools to survive in an environment where they have been left behind and where they are consistently criminalized. They develop practices that seem to embrace criminality as a means of contesting a system that sees them as criminals. Sociologist Richard Quinney argues that
poor people engage in crimes such as stealing, robbing, and pirating as “acts of survival,” in an economic system where they have been left behind and where their well-being is not fulfilled by other collective means. He further argues that some poor and working-class people engage in “crimes of resistance,” such as sabotaging workplace equipment and destroying public property, as a form of protest against their economic conditions. Sociologist John Hagedorn argues that one promising avenue for transforming the lives of marginalized young people is to embrace their resistance: “Encouraging cultural resistance identities and linking them to social movements, like those in the United States opposing gentrification, police brutality, or deportations, may present the best opportunity to reach out to our alienated youth.” Sociologist Felix Padilla finds that gang-involved youths hold a “conscious understanding of the workings of social institutions.” Padilla quotes education scholar Henry Giroux to frame his analysis of the critical consciousness developed by marginalized young people:

In some cases . . . youngsters may not be fully aware of the political grounds of the position toward the conventional society, except for a general awareness of its dominating nature and the need to somehow escape from it without relegating themselves to a future they do not want. Even this vague understanding and its attendant behavior portend a politically progressive logic.

I build on this work by demonstrating how the young men in this study engaged in acts of survival and crimes of resistance. Further, I argue that some of their non-serious offenses were committed as acts of resistance to being criminalized. The boys in this study were clearly aware of, recognized, and had an analysis of the system that criminalized them. Consequently, youth labeled as deviants participated in everyday practices of resistance. This approach is different from the one adopted by Philippe Bourgois, described in the preceding section, in that young men commit crime not just in search of respect and honor but also as a conscious revolt against a system of exclusion and punitive control that they clearly understand. Sociologist Howard Becker finds that labeled youths resist by internalizing their label and committing more crime. My study finds a missing link in this analysis: the internalization of criminality is only one outcome in the labeling process; another outcome that young
people who are labeled partake in is resistance: they internalize criminalization, flip it on its head, and generate action that seeks to change the very system that oppresses them.

The young men in this study constantly participated in everyday acts of resistance that did not make sense to adults. Teachers, police officers, and community-center workers were often baffled by the deviant acts committed by the boys. From the perspective of adults, these transgressions and small crimes were ridiculous and irrational because the risk of being caught was high and the benefit derived from committing the deviant act was minuscule. This frustration led adults to abandon empathy for the boys and to apply the toughest sanctions on them. “If they’re going to act like idiots, I am going to have to give them the axe,” explained one of the gang task-force officers.

Many of the adults I interviewed believed that the boys’ defiance was, as some called it, “stupid.” Sarcastic remarks such as “that was smart” often followed when a youth purposely broke a simple rule, leading him to be ostracized, kicked out of class, or even arrested. Why would the boys break the simplest of rules knowing that there would be grave consequences? From the perspective of the boys, they were breaking the rules in order to resist a system that seemed stacked against them. In many ways, breaking the rules was one of the few resources that the boys could use in response to criminalization.

Why would these boys steal a twenty-five-cent bag of chips when they had money in their pocket? Curse out a police officer who was trying to befriend them? Act indifferent to a potential employer? Or purposely not answer their probation officer’s call during curfew time, even though they were sitting next to the phone? These seemingly irrational transgressions often created meaning that gave these youngsters dignity in an environment that already saw them as criminal prior to their committing the act. But working for dignity does not necessarily translate to working for freedom. In other words, when the boys sought out dignity, they were often at risk of losing their freedom; when they worked for freedom, they were making an attempt to stay out of jail or prison but often felt that they had lost their dignity in the process.

Patterns of behavior that are often misrecognized as ignorant, stupid, and self-defeating by authority figures, policymakers, and scholars are
often young people’s attempt to use the resources provided by their environment to transform their social conditions. Sociologist Ann Swidler’s concept of “culture as repertoire” contends that individuals deploy different, often contradicting actions in the social world based on the needs demanded by specific social situations. For Swidler, culture influences action by providing a tool kit of actions to choose from. This notion of culture is important in the study of working-class populations, because it provides a space for scholars to “study culture and poverty without blaming the victim.”

The boys used the resources around them to develop a response to what they perceived as punitive treatment. Their responses where often misinterpreted by authority figures. Ronny, for example, responded to his potential employer’s cold gestures by using the tools he had learned from others in the community: to avoid being perceived as aggressive toward White women. Whereas the protocols of mainstream culture would have provided him with the understanding that he should shake a potential employer’s hand, his racialization had conditioned him to remain passive and avoid physical contact of any kind, even a seemingly innocuous handshake. The youths in this study demonstrated a yearning for being accepted by mainstream society and used the resources available to them in an attempt to do so. However, their actions were misinterpreted as acts of deviance, and at times even their phenotypes were seen as indicating deviance. This in turn led the system to further criminalize them. The boys had utilized the resources available to them to show the system that they were worthy of being treated as young people with promise, as potential good students, and as hardworking, honest employees. However, the misrecognition of these actions not only denied the boys access; it interpreted their well-intended acts as deviant and even criminal activity.

The Stolen Bag of Chips

One fall afternoon, I met with fifteen-year-old Flaco, a Latino gang-associated young man from east Oakland. We joined three of his friends as they walked to their usual afterschool hang out, Walnut Park. They decided to make a stop at Sam’s Liquor Store. I walked in with them, noticing a sign on the outside that read, “Only two kids allowed in store at one time.”

[105]
realized that they were breaking the store rule by entering in a group of four. I pretended to walk in separately from the group to see how the store clerk would respond to their transgression. I stood in the back of the store next to the soft-drink and beer refrigerators. Flaco walked up to the candy-bar aisle—keeping a good distance between himself and the Snickers, Twix, and Skittles, to show the clerk, who was already staring him down, that he was not attempting to steal. He grabbed a candy bar, held it far away from his body, walked a few steps, and placed it on the counter. Many of the boys in this study often maintained their distance in the candy or soda aisles at stores. This may have been a way for them to show the store that they were not attempting to steal. Store clerks in the neighborhoods I studied were always apprehensive of customers. They watched people from the moment they walked in and had surveillance cameras set up; one clerk had taped on his counter personal pictures of himself holding an AK-47 rifle to indicate to customers that he was prepared. This particular clerk may have been concerned that too many kids in his store meant that he could not keep an eye on all of them at the same time.

The store clerk, a balding, middle-aged, Asian American male, pointed to the door and yelled, “Only two kids allowed in the store at a time!” The three youths who were in line to pay for their items looked at the store clerk and at each other. I could see in their faces the look of despair as their most pleasurable moment of the day, to bite into a delicious candy bar, fell apart. Mike, who stood closest to the entrance of the door, responded, “We ain’t doing shit.” The store clerk looked at him and replied, “I am going to call the police!” Mike grabbed a twenty-five-cent bag of Fritos Flamin’ Hot chips, lifted it up in front of the clerk’s face, and said, “You see this? I was gonna pay for it, but now I ain’t paying for shit, stupid mothafucka.” He rushed out of the store with the bag of chips. The clerk picked up the phone and called the police. The rest of the youngsters dropped the snacks they were in line to purchase and ran out of the store. I walked up to the store clerk and gave him a quarter for Mike, who had stolen the chips. With an infuriated look, the clerk responded, “It’s too late. The police are on their way to get the robbers.”

When I walked out of the store, the boys had all disappeared. I was not able to track them down until a few days later. When I ran into Flaco, he informed me that the police had arrested Mike that day for stealing the
twenty-five-cent bag of chips. After interviewing the boys and observing the store clerk’s interactions with them soon after this event, I found that Mike’s “irrational” behavior had changed the way the store clerk interacted with the boys. The boys believed that the store clerk had begun to treat them with more respect. The store clerk avoided provoking negative interactions with the boys, even if it meant allowing a few more boys into the store than his store policy demanded. While even Mike’s peers believed that his actions were “crazy,” they also acknowledged that something significant had changed in their interactions with the store clerk. For example, Flaco thought that Mike had overreacted, but he also rationalized Mike’s actions. Because of Mike, Flaco felt respected by the store clerk the next time he went in the store: “Mike fucked up. He was acting hyphy [crazy] that day. He should have paid the guy. . . . But because of what he did, me and my dogs go into the sto’, and the guy don’t say shit. We all go in like five deep—like ‘what?’—and dude [the store clerk] don’t say shit no more.” When I asked Mike why he had stolen the bag of chips, he responded, “That fool was trippin’. He should’ve come correct. I was gonna pay him. You saw, I had the money in my hand. . . . That fool knows not to fuck with us anymore. . . . I did get taken in for that, but it don’t matter. They gave me probation and shit. I’ll just keep it cool now since that fool will keep it cool now too.” In Mike’s worldview, his strategy of fighting for dignity at the cost of giving up his freedom had paid off. Mike’s actions resulted in his commitment to the criminal justice system. According to him, he was very aware of this risk when he stole the bag of chips. He had grown frustrated at the treatment he had received at school, by police, and then culminating at the store. This frustration, and a deep desire to feel respected, led Mike to willfully expose himself to incarceration. In the end, Mike lost his freedom, becoming supervised by the criminal justice system. Nonetheless, Mike gained a sense of dignity for himself and his peers, which, in his mind, made it worth exchanging his freedom. This scenario is representative of many of the crimes that the other boys committed. Demanding dignity from the system generated a paradox for the boys: they all indicated wanting to be free of incarceration, policing, and surveillance, while, at the same time, punitive surveillance, policing, and discipline led many of them to consciously seek their dignity and act in a way that pipelined them into the criminal justice sys-
tem. Nonetheless, striving for dignity led some of the boys deeper into the system.

The boys took control of their criminalization by using the few resources they had at hand. In this example, Mike and his friends changed the interactional dynamic between themselves and the store clerk. The store clerk would no longer yell or enforce the rule of no more than two boys in the store at a time, which the youths perceived as ridiculous. Instead, he adjusted his practices by allowing the boys into the store, as long as they did not steal. However, the price that Mike paid was steep. This arrest later led him deeper into the criminal justice system.

I asked Mike, “Why didn’t you steal something more expensive?” He told me that he thought about it, but, in the moment, he didn’t care what he took. He wanted to prove a point to the clerk: “not to fuck with me.” For Mike, stealing the bag of chips wasn’t about saving the quarter he had to pay for the chips; it wasn’t about accumulating the most valuable commodity he could get his hands on; it wasn’t about stealing because he was poor and wanted to eat a bag of chips. Although he may have had a desire for all of the above, the purpose of stealing the bag of chips was to redeem himself for being shamed and feeling disrespected. In the end, despite facing further punishment, Mike and his friends felt that their actions were not in vain; they had won a small battle in a war they were so tired of losing. While authority figures expected the boys to desist and follow the rules, and while the boys expressed a deep desire “to be left alone” and remain free, one of the only resources they had to feel respected within the system was to actively engage in behaviors that defied the rules of the game. This in turn led to further misrecognition and criminalization.

The Probation Officer

Like Mike’s store incident, other youths often broke rules that they could have easily followed. Examples of this rule breaking were taunting and cursing at police officers when they were simply trying to say hello, purposely breaking a rule in front of a teacher or principal, and breaking an 8 p.m. curfew with the probation officer by not walking inside the house to answer the officer’s phone call at 8:01 p.m. Flaco’s and Spider’s probation officer, Ms. Lawrence, discussed this nonsense rule breaking with me.
“Dummy Smart”

V.R.: Ms. Lawrence, why do these young men continue to get violated [arrested for violating their probation agreement]?

Ms. Lawrence: I don’t know what is wrong with these kids. It’s simple. Do your program, do good, and act right. Eighty percent of my kids recidivate, and it’s for the dumbest things. They spit on a teacher and get kicked out of school, or they won’t cooperate when a cop pulls them over. The other day one of the boys was arrested for talking back to the principal. He told her that the police could not go into his house without a warrant, after the principal threatened to call the cops on him. The principal dialed the school officer, and he arrested him for threatening his teacher. Why did he have to talk back to the principal? They act like they want to go back to the hall [juvenile hall].

Ms. Lawrence spoke of many more youths who did not follow simple directions. She could not figure out why these young men were risking so much by disobeying basic rules. It seemed that no matter what repercussion was placed in front of them—loss of educational or employment opportunities, loss of freedom, or six months in jail—they continued to break the rules. I asked her if she knew why the boys acted this way if they knew the repercussions. She replied,

I could see them not wanting to do something, but we all have to follow the rules in society. If we all were to break even the smallest of rules, the world would be chaotic. There would be crime everywhere. . . . We [probation officers] aren’t assigned to them because the kids are good. They did the crime, and they have to prove to society that they can stop committing crimes. . . . They have to learn to follow basic rules at some point in life, . . . even if they have to learn the hard way.

Sociologist Thomas Scheff argues that the combination of alienation (being an outcast at school and shamed on the street) with the repression of emotions (in this case, the boys’ need to hide their feelings and put up a tough front to prove themselves on the street) leads to violence.21 The boys consistently expressed feeling emotional alienation. In addition, expectations of manhood on the street, and in other institutional settings,
dictated to the boys that their emotions be repressed. This combination of emotional alienation and repression of emotions may have led some of the boys to commit "crimes of resistance." When probation officers attempted to "teach" the boys by using punitive measures, the boys felt alienated. They then normalized this negative treatment, believing that it might be treatment they deserved and that this treatment might help them to rehabilitate. When the boys realized that the punitive treatment failed as a reform tool, they rejected it, pushing back, often through the only means they had, crimes of resistance.

Slick and the Policeman

In the middle of a warm, spring school day, I drove up to the boys' hangout, "Wino Park," to look for Slick. They had named the park after all the drug addicts and alcoholics who practically lived there. On regular occasions, I spotted men sleeping on the lawn, homeless women with shopping carts full of trinkets they had collected in an attempt to sell them, and half a dozen or so middle-aged crack- or heroin-addicted men sitting on the old and splintered wood tables, which sat adjacent to solid metal, rusted-out barbeque grills. Some of the grills had a fire burning, but never any food. A group of about eight teenage boys stood in a circle talking with one another. Some of them were leaning on a tree, others were sitting on a bench, and one of them was squatting on the ground in the classic cholo (gangster) pose, sitting on one leg with the other leg extended, foot pointing straight ahead. They talked about common topics: girls, enemies, and police. They told stories about being brutalized by the police. A common practice, as had been experienced by Ronny with his probation officer, had to do with being taken to the ground by the collarbone. One of the boys, who did not want me to mention his personal information or name or even to assign him a pseudonym, explained the process: "That fool stuck his fingers inside my neck [points to the collarbone area] and slammed me to the ground. Then he made me get up and [pulled] me for half a block, with one hand inside my fucking neck!" Many other stories of brutality followed from the rest of the boys. "You 'member the time Russ got knocked the fuck out by the task force for talking shit? We were standing in front of KFC [Kentucky Fried
Chicken], and task [force] was looking at us crazy, so Russ said, ‘Was-sup?’ And the cop ran up and scraped his ass.” This officer, Officer Swee-ney, a White man in his forties with a shaved bald head, was infamous for beating down young Black and Latino boys.

I asked them, “Why do you keep getting attacked by cops?” “We make them get mad. We like it when they get mad. It makes us know that we did our part.” “Even if you get beat up and go to jail?” I asked. The response, and agreement, from the rest of the group was, “Don’t matter what happens to us, as long as we make them respect us the next time they see us.” Slick explained: “One of the cops almost broke my leg the other day. He slammed the door on my foot, and he knew my foot was sticking out. That shit still hurts, but I know that he won’t fuck with me like that next time, ’cause I gave him a hard time for fucking with me.” I asked him what made him certain that the police officer would give him respect the next time he saw him. Slick responded, “Because I saw him again, a week later, and he just looked at me crazy, and I looked at him crazy, but he didn’t stop me anymore like he used to.” Slick took the risk of undergoing immediate physical punishment, rather than suffer ongoing systematic harassment. His gamble paid off. The officer no longer harassed him. Slick felt good about being able to gain respect from the police officer, since this was the same officer who had beat him when he was still a child. In Slick’s perspective, more defiance could lead to less harassment. Although I witnessed police officers “back down” when young men defied them, I also witnessed the strategy backfire on the boys, as, eventually, this resistance led officers to call in backup, and then a group of officers would suppress the entire group. On two encounters I observed, a police officer called in backup: a group of officers arrived, assault rifles in hands, and handcuffed and searched all the boys. Some of the boys, who had not been placed into the gang database, were placed into it on these occasions. Others were arrested for the smallest of infractions.

**Defiance as Resistance**

It seemed that defiance constituted a temporary success to the boys. Watching interactions between the boys and authority figures was often like watching a life-sized game of chess in action, with a rook strategically
moving in response to a queen's movement. A police officer would get out of his car, the boys would posture, an officer would grab a young man, his friends would prepare to run, an officer would humiliate one of the boys, and the boy would respond by not cooperating or by cursing back. As one side moved its pieces to repress, another moved its pieces to resist. The boys were almost always captured and eliminated from the chess board, but not before they had encroached into the opponent's territory, throwing the system off and influencing the rules and movements of the game.

Returning to the stolen bag of chips, we can see how adults and the boys perceived specific acts of defiance in completely different terms. I mentioned the incident to Ms. Stanley, the probation officer, and she responded, “Any normal person would have paid the cashier. This kid must be crazy. . . . Shoo, it gets me mad just thinking about it. Let’s not talk about it.” It is this “craziness”—as understood by the dominant group, adults attempting to enact social control—which the boys found productive to their resistance. For Mike, it was more important to claim his dignity than to follow the rules and pay for the chips. He was convinced that three days in juvenile hall, the stigma he received in the community, the trouble he got into with his parents, and the year of probation he received were all worth making a statement to the store clerk.

Mike and Ronny were searching for something beyond immediate gratification. They did not want to follow the rules in order to gain the social rewards—a good grade, a legitimate bag of chips, completing a probation program, and becoming a “normal” citizen—for being rule followers. Instead, the boys chose a road that at first seemed futile and ignorant, a self-defeating path that led them into more trouble but eventually provided them with a sense of agency and dignity against criminalization.

“Dummy Smart” and “Going Dumb”

Darius was a sixteen-year-old African American young man. He understood his social world to be a place in which he was a suspect. His strategy was to devise actions for fooling the system into believing what it expected of him, to break the law. In school, for example, he acted out, even though he was one of the smartest students in the class, what he called “dummy smart”: 

[ 112 ]
DARIUS: ’Cause, it’s like—you feel me [you understand]? It’s like, I still hung out with good people, but, like, there was, you know, like, that kid in class that was hecka bad, but he is dummy smart, feel me? That’s how my partners and me is. We was the kids that the teacher be like, “Oh, what’s the answer to this?” She try to play us like we don’t know what we talking about, but we’ll still be able to answer, without hearing nothing she say.

V.R.: Did this get you into trouble?

DARIUS: I got suspended [in ninth grade].

Darius’s suspension made him vulnerable to further sanctions, both in school and in the community.

V.R.: How did you do after you started getting suspended, and, like, how did you do in school?

DARIUS: After I got suspended, I came back to school and told the teacher I wanted to do good, or else . . . She thought I was threatening her, but what I meant was that I wanted to change, or else I would be very upset at myself. She sent me out [of school] again. I got angry. I ran into this dude [on the street] that I did not like, but I had kept it cool. I got mad, so I fought him. After that fight, uh, I went to juvenile, ’cause it was a one-on-one fight with me and him. And then, like, my family, I told them to let me fight him on my own, but they thought I wanted them to help me. So we all came together and whooped his ass. Dude came home with a black eye and busted lips, pressed charges. I went to jail the next day. And that’s how my juvenile-hall life started, and just kept on going. . . . It started with a suspension, and then I ended up getting out of juvenile hall. . . . And then me just looking like a suspicious person, and then somebody book me again, just for being out there.

V.R.: So tell me that story. So you had gone to juvy, you got on probation, and then you got out, and someone thought you looked suspicious. Tell me that story.
Darius: Actually, I was on my way to school last year, around September, and... this dude, right here on my alley, was looking for somebody who looked like the person who robbed him the other day, broke his glasses, and took his phone, his backpack, and his school supplies. I was on my way to school on e-one-four [East 14th Avenue], and a dude try to hit me with his car. I started running 'cause I was scared. He was [a police] undercover. He thought I was guilty 'cause I was running, but I was running 'cause I was scared. I kept moving. This nigga comes hella fast, like he was trying to hit me. Next thing I know, he gets out of his car and arrests me for robbing this kid, even though I wasn't even there.

Darius played out deviant politics by performing the role that he believed teachers expected of a young Black man, defiance and ignorance. However, when it was time to turn in his work or to answer a sophisticated question, Darius was prepared, shocking the teacher and throwing her off. This also played out on the streets. In two encounters with police that I observed, Darius put up a tough front and defied their authority. However, when police officers were ready to handcuff him and throw him in the patrol car, Darius’s code switched, he began to be cordial and respectful to the officers, and began to recite his legal rights. This also threw off the officers and led them to release him.

Darius had been arrested twice for violating probation: once for talking back to his probation officer and another time for intimidating a clerk at a Foot Locker shoe store. Darius believed that he was criminalized from a young age. His reaction was to mock the system, to make it seem that he was up to no good, despite his innocence. Doing this, in turn, made him feel empowered. However, Darius did not realize that his performance would lead police to accuse him of a crime he did not commit. Darius had mocked and played the teachers and police to a point that led them to impose a criminal label on him. In the end, as Darius described, “If it walk like a duck, talk like a duck, it must be a duck.” In mocking the system, young people gained a sense of empowerment. However, these same strategies added more fuel to
the criminalization fire. Many of them realized that they were actively involved in adding fuel to the fire. However, they believed that it was worth the negative consequences. Maintaining a sense of dignity—feeling accepted and feeling that their human rights were respected—was a central struggle. The boys consciously chose to fight for their dignity, even if it meant risking their freedom. Striving for “dignity” is a more accurate way to describe the actions of the boys in this study. “Respect” or “honor,” which some ethnographers have used to describe a similar process, may, to a mainstream audience, connote a more antagonistic and fatalistic process, in which young men demand acceptance from the world for any and all of their behavior, often through a rogue approach and a negative attitude. Striving for dignity is a more basic struggle, often overlooked, in which boys are demanding the right to be seen as “normal,” to be treated as fellow human beings, to have a sense of positive rites, and not to feel criminalized.

Crimes of Resistance

Many of the young men self-consciously “acted stupid” as a strategy to discredit the significance of a system which had excluded and punished them. These deviant politics garnered attention from the youth control complex, frustrating its agents: the police, school personnel, and others. This frustration led to more punishment, which in turn led to a deeper crisis of control in the community. In the end, it was this crisis of control, when institutions were not able to provide a sufficient amount of social order, which the young men consciously perceived to be a successful result of their defiance. As Flaco put it, “They trying to regulate me, right? So if they can’t regulate me, then that means they not doing their job. So my job is to not—what’s that word?—confirm [conform].”

One of the classic ethnographies on working-class youth resistance is sociologist Paul Willis’s book Learning to Labour. Willis argues that working-class youths are reproduced as working-class adults, because of their own resistance to the dominant middle-class culture. For Willis, in practicing an “oppositional working class culture,” youth contribute to the “maintenance and reproduction of the social order”: [ 115 ]
It is their own culture which most effectively prepares some working class lads for the manual giving of their labour power; we may say that there is an element of self-damnation in the taking on of subordinate roles in Western Capitalism. However, the damnation is experienced, paradoxically, as true learning, affirmation, appropriation, and as a form of resistance.  

Willis complicates agency by explaining that resistance is often futile and self-damaging but that, paradoxically, this resistance brings about a sense of liberation. Among the boys I observed, even though their resistance to criminalization often led them to become more criminalized, they often developed identities of resistance that allowed them to go beyond self-damnation. Karl Marx’s classic statement that people make history but not out of circumstances of their own choosing applies well in this case. As the boys created a dignifying identity, despite punitive consequences, they changed the way in which they perceived themselves, determining modes of interaction and influencing the way in which the system “dealt” with them. Their resistance resulted in harsher punishment, more brutality, and longer incarceration terms, yet they also exposed the massive contradictions and failures of social control dominant in their experience with education, law enforcement, and community institutions.

Infrapolitics

Anthropologist James Scott sees marginalized people’s oppositional culture, or “everyday acts of resistance,” as a massive and effective, yet scattered and unorganized, social movement. He defines “infrapolitics” as invisible, “tactical” subjectivities among oppressed groups, which seem to follow the status quo but in reality are evading power relations. Although this resistance may seem futile or meaningless, Scott maintains that it has historically made possible huge strides in contesting inequality. Labor historian Robin Kelley applies Scott’s theories to today’s inner city by applying “infrapolitics” to the cultural practices of the Black working class of the twentieth century. For Kelley, marginalized groups in the United States also practice infrapolitics on an everyday basis. These tactical politics are part of “a dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices”
deployed by oppressed groups, which at first glance seem to maintain an appearance of deviance or absurdity.\(^\text{30}\) According to Kelley, even though this infrapolitical mask worn by the Black working class has, on the surface, affirmed the dominant group’s myth that the Black working class is passive-aggressive, lazy, criminal, or conniving, at a deeper level, this strategy has managed to transform power relations by providing agency, empowerment, and a voice to those with few resources. It is a strategy that exists outside of “established organizations or organized social movements.” Yet, according to Kelley, it is the foundation for what forms social movements of the masses. Kelley provides Malcolm X as an example; Malcolm X’s contribution to the civil rights movement could not have been possible without his participation in infrapolitics as a youth. Even though Malcolm X himself, in his autobiography, dismisses his own youthful experience of performing the zoot-suit as a useless negative past of wearing “ghetto adornments,” his “participation in the underground subculture of Black working-class youth during the war was not a detour on the road to political consciousness, but rather an essential element of his radicalization.”\(^\text{31}\) Malcolm X’s “ghetto adornments” and culture were an essential building block for his development as a political activist. In the same vein, the “irrational” acts of defiance that the boys in this study deployed may have, at the very least, provided them a sense of dignity and empowerment, and, at best, these acts could become seeds that sprouted into a more critical political and intellectual analysis of the system that criminalized them.

Making the System Believe Its Own Hype

The boys consistently chose to act “bad” in circumstances in which adults expected them to act “good.” Almost all the acts that led to an arrest for violating probation were committed as conscious acts of resistance; in the boys’ account, they knew they were facing very severe consequences but decided to break the rules in order to make a point. This may have been their way of resisting what they perceived to be unfair treatment and punishment. These transgressions served as a resource for feeling empowered and for gaining redress for the humiliation, stigma, and punishment that they encountered. Because they reported that they committed their transgressions as a way of “getting back at the system,” as Ronny
explained, I am calling these acts deviant politics, by which I mean the political actions—the resistance—that youth labeled by society as deviant use to respond to punishment that they ubiquitously encounter.

At a cultural level, these deviant politics played out through music, dance, and dress. A youth cultural formation, the “Hyphy Movement,” became prevalent among the boys. The Hyphy Movement was a subcultural, hip-hop movement started by youth in the San Francisco Bay Area around the year 2000. Underground artists from the Bay Area had rapped about “being hyphy” for years. Eventually, a few of their songs became popular in the national hip-hop scene. Beyond being a discourse used in rap music to indicate a new kind of “cool,” hyphy also became a youth cultural practice. *Hyphy* was defined by young people in many ways, and the youths provided the following definitions: acting out, defying authority, breaking rules, being antagonistic, and embracing disreputable behavior as everyday practice. For young people, this was a style that gave meaning to their experiences of marginalization, of being seen by society as “dumb,” “stupid,” and “hyphy” (hyperactive, crazy, out of control). Some of these practices included dancing in the most ridiculous manner possible, standing on top of a car as the car drove off with no driver to control it, known as “ghost riding,” and acting “retarded” in class or on the street in the presence of authority figures who expected otherwise. In a sense, these young people had consciously internalized this dispute and had made it pleasurable, aesthetic, meaningful, and a form of resilience. As Darius explained, “If you gonna pretend I am dumb, then I’ll pretend I’m dumb. Then you gonna get tricked. Then you gonna—you feel me?—get confused. Then I’ll pull a hustle on you, and you not gonna know what hit you.” Darius’s understanding of himself as being “dummy smart” came from his subcultural style: hyphy. He was attempting to negotiate the negative aspects of hyphy and give them a positive twist: that you can “act dumb” and still “be smart.”

Hyphy was also a hip-hop dance style that involved spontaneous, sporadic, and “dumb” dance moves. Young people danced as if they had no inhibitions; moves were meant to appear ridiculous. Youths used the following language to describe it: “get dumb,” “go stupid,” “ride the yellow bus.” “Riding the yellow bus” referred to the students who were in special education and were picked up from home on a yellow bus. One
famous Oakland rapper, Mistah F.A.B, wore a helmet and drove around in a yellow bus so as to appear what he called “retarded.” The boys would spontaneously “act retarded” in various contexts, including in the classroom, in stores, and on the street. This would throw off authority figures and make them believe that the youths were ready to commit a crime or destroy property. When police were called in, the boys toned it down and acted “normal.” This process of acting up and “going dumb” was a way for young people to resist punitive social control and to play on the fears and expectations that authority figures had. Doing this, in turn, developed a sense of agency, empowerment, and accomplishment in the boys.

This subculture was also deeply embedded in school practices. Some of the boys would spontaneously “act ridiculous” or “go dumb” in the middle of class or in the middle of the school yard. Students would “go dumb” in front of teachers or administrators who had treated them as such. In other words, they played a game and flipped on its head the very stigma which had been imposed on them from a very young age. Eight of the boys in this study reported having been placed in special education classes from a young age. All of them believed that they were not special education students and that the system was using special education classes as a form of control, to discipline them for acting up in the “regular” classroom. This subculture may have been born from the frustration with society’s demand for young Black and Latino males to succeed in the mainstream, despite the many structural and punitive barriers that prohibit them from doing so. It may very well be that the Hyphy Movement began as a cultural response to systematic structural processes of neglect, pathologization, and criminalization of an entire community of poor young people in the Bay Area. The Hyphy Movement, and many of the “crimes of resistance” that accompanied it, can be understood as a form of resistance that consciously made the system believe its own hype, when young people acted “dumb” and “criminal” as a means to an end, to feel a sense of freedom and dignity. This process is similar to postcolonial theorist and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon’s explanation of the social-psychological condition which colonized subjects found themselves to be in: “I had rationalized the world and the world had rejected me on the basis of color prejudice. Since no agreement was possible on the level of reason, I threw myself back toward unreason.” Moreover, the boys
developed a dissident culture that provided self-generated escapes from punishment. Education scholar Jannelle Dance argues in her book *Tough Fronts*, “The mainstream bias of schooling can change temporary, survivalistic attitudes into firm political convictions.” She shows that African American male youths develop “tough fronts,” performances of being mean and man enough, not because they are pathological or because they resist receiving an education but rather because they have tried and tried to succeed in the system but have been systematically excluded. Some of the boys in this study also described the streets and the subcultures developed on the streets as self-empowering. For some of the boys, these practices became political convictions.

**Youth Mobilization against Punitive Social Control**

As the youths in this study experienced firsthand the punitive grip of the state, they fought back with the few tools they could find in their social settings, often with only “weapons of the weak,” like crimes of resistance, at their disposal. Instead of remaining passive and allowing the system to shame, criminalize, and exclude them, the boys continued to produce scattered acts of resistance. From stealing at the store to cussing out police officers who had once brutalized them, the boys engaged themselves in deviant politics.

While these political convictions can be read as a potential solution for the dire conditions of criminalization that many marginalized people face, we should not romanticize the petty crimes or rebellious acts committed by the boys in this study. Boys who resisted often suffered real and drastic consequences. Sometimes, they did not even realize that they were resisting. Often, they were simply, as they called it, “getting stupid,” meaning that they acted “bad” for the sake of being “bad.” Moreover, deviant politics were often messy—one example is the perpetuation of misogyny discussed in the following chapter. These kinds of practices had few long-term positive outcomes for any of the boys in the study.

However, these deviant politics may have been a means to an end, the development of oppositional consciousness and political activism, which, in turn, empowered some boys to become agents who fought to
dismantle punitive social control and transform other forms of oppression. This is what happened to nine of the boys in this study, who became involved in an organization that protested police brutality and what they called, using feminist scholar Angela Davis’s term, “the prison industrial complex,” a system of private and government agencies that economically benefit from the incarceration of marginalized populations. These boys had joined grassroots organizations in Oakland after meeting community organizers who had recruited them because of their status as what the community organizers called “survivors of the juvenile justice system.” The boys related to and recognized this analysis of the system, which compelled them to join the community organizers in meetings and marches that protested police brutality and the building of incarceration facilities.

During a revisit in 2009, I found that all nine of these young men, four Black and five Latino, continued to participate in formal dissent. They took part in marches, vigils, and meetings that demanded justice for the killing of Oscar Grant by a police officer. Grant was unarmed and handcuffed when the officer shot him in the back. The incident was caught on video and became national headline news. Although none of the boys knew Oscar Grant, all nine boys described Oscar Grant as “one of us.” Kobe described a rally that he attended after the killing:

The march for my boy Oscar Grant, man, was downtown on Wednesday, that Wednesday when we was riding it [marching] or whatever, and we gave up. We was in, like, a little part of, like, an alley street, so the crew I was with, we gave in. We was gonna lay down, and they [police] came up to us and was hitting us in the head with the guns and pinned their knees to our backs and twisted my arm. I thought he was gonna break it.

The fact that Kobe continued to be brutalized by police, now as a protestor, bolstered his worldview that all police are part of a system of criminalization and brutality. Prior to Grant’s killing, many of these boys had been brutalized or had witnessed friends or family brutalized or killed by police. Eleven of the boys claimed to know a friend or family member who had been severely injured or killed by police. Smoky Man reflected on why he became politically active:
I fight ’cause all the stuff they been doing. They [the police] took [killed] two of my cousins in 2004, for no reason. They came out of a store, and they thought they had some drugs or some guns on them, and they shot both of them. One of them died at the scene. One of them dies like a week later in the hospital. They had no right to do that, so this is payback, man. Anything I saw and been through with the cops, you can’t tell me it’s a good cop.

Fourteen of the Latino and nine of the Black boys in the study commented on the racial implications of criminalization. They all believed that, despite having differences on the streets with the other racial group, there existed a social order in which interracial conflict was rare, but so too was racial solidarity. The majority of the time the boys in this study found ways to avoid negative interactions with the other racial group, by following certain rules of avoidance and respect. Despite their close living and recreational proximity to one another, Black and Latino boys operated under a “give and take” social order and rarely had conflict with one another.35

Whenever the boys in this study talked about racial solidarity, it was often linked to the struggle against criminalization and police brutality. Jordan’s perspective is representative of the perspective held by the nine boys who became politically active: “I’m speaking towards the Black perspective, but I understand they treat the Mexicans the same way! They treat the Mexicans the same way, the same way: they all affiliated with gangs. They feel any Mexicans are in gangs—you know what I’m saying? They mess with Mexicans all the same ways they discriminate Black people.” Although each racial group may have experienced criminalization in unique ways, what I found with the boys in this study is that they believed that their experiences were very similar. This belief, in turn, generated a racial solidarity among boys who had been criminalized. They held a worldview that informed them that “Mexicans and Blacks are treated in the same way.” This feeling of collective racialization facilitated the process by which nine out of the forty boys in this study participated in formal political action against police brutality.36 Meetings and marches that the boys participated in were multiracial, including Blacks, Latinos, and Whites.
The process of being criminalized developed oppositional identities in all the boys in this study. Some enacted this opposition by committing “irrational” transgressions, such as “going dumb” or disobeying their probation officers. A few boys developed a deeper sense of dissent by participating in marches, protests, and meetings aimed at ending police brutality. While criminalization had many detrimental consequences for the boys, for many it also sparked a deep desire to know why they were targeted, and some developed a keen sense of dissent, often informal and occasionally more formal.

Prominent social-movements scholar Pamela Oliver reminds us that, in the context of mass incarceration generated by the repression of the social movements of the mid-twentieth century, we have to pay attention to the new and unique forms of resistance and mobilization taking place among marginalized populations. She argues that among these populations dissent may also be expressed in crime:

There is individual dissent and collective crime, and both are common. The more repressive a system, the more dissent takes the form of individual, often anonymous, acts of resistance. . . . We need to ask how oppressed people can gain redress under conditions of extreme repression, and to understand the forms that resistance can take when the possibility of direct resistance is blocked.\(^{37}\)

In an environment where there were few formal avenues for expressing dissent toward a system, which the boys believed to be extremely repressive, they developed forms of resistance that they believed could change, even if only temporarily, the outcome of their treatment. The boys believed they had gained redress for the punitive social control they had encountered by adopting a subculture of resistance based on fooling the system and by committing crimes of resistance, which made no sense to the system but were fully recognizable to those who had been misrecognized and criminalized. The paradox of punitive social control is that it socially incapacitates too many marginalized populations; at the same time, this system of repression may just be the catalyst for the next wave of massive social movements from below.