

“The Truth of the Matter” : An Ethnography of the Working Sphere

by

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INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past year and a half I've been questioning the social implications and interpersonal perspectives of work within the formal and informal economy. Firstly, I'd like to address what I'm referring to when I say "formal" or "informal" work. These terms do not represent a hierarchical placement of work but rather make a distinction between those who are in consistent contact with government bodies and those who are not. The formal economy refers to jobs or services that you get paid for and that are recorded through any type of government or financial institution. This could be a barista, sanitation worker, or CEO of any leading industry. Essentially, any job that taxes you or makes you sign a W-2 working order; they are one in the same. For the majority of "average" workers, this could safely represent the extent of their work experience. There's no shame in working exclusively within the formal economy seeing as that is overwhelmingly the most perpetuated form of work. When I refer to the informal economy I'm addressing the work force that exists without taxation, direct inference from any government institution, or protection from the state. Informal work occupies a spectrum that can range anywhere from something as mundane and wholesome as dog walking or babysitting to the more morally/ethically ambiguous activities of gambling or large scale distribution of narcotics. Although the informal economy is occupied by a diverse set of activities, jobs, and businesses, it is still often stigmatized as being solely composed of shady dealings, under the table business ventures, and overall unsavory figures. The truth of the matter is that a fair average of informal workers are trying to make an honest living in a system where the cards are undeniably stacked against them. Throughout my own childhood, adolescence, and into my young adult life I've come to know a variety of labors that could be performed in order to make money. As a result of

having what I would describe as a diverse perspective of the workforce, I realize there's a skewed notion behind how work is understood and further reinforced socially, politically, within the educational system, and in direct engagements with work itself. Growing up, especially as a black man in America, there are certain notions surrounding identity in relation to working that have an elastic and sticky attachment to our culture that presents itself in the lives of not just black and brown boys but men and women of all ages around the globe. The warped socio-political implications and power dynamics surrounding informal work, who's working, and why they're working are not accidental means of operation but rather represent a complex and nuanced system with, at times, overtly malicious intentions. It's no secret that accessibility to work, or rather desired work (work with good benefits, decent hours, and livable pay) is reserved for some and not others. The conversation surrounding minimum wage, livable wages, health insurance, quality of living, etc. are inherently tied to work and the working condition. Unfortunately, these conversations don't just exist as hypothetical thought pieces being bounced between various news outlets. I've sat firsthand, outside of my fieldwork and witnessed, listened to, or been a part of all ends of the conversation that regard the relationship to working. I believe one of the main issues of concern regarding the topic of work is the powers that be, within any establishment of work. I'm not trying to demonize authority figures or set up a stage for the bagering of those in power but this conversation cannot be had without the acknowledgment of who's in charge of maintaining the status quo. I would like to be extremely clear that this isn't some sort of "rebel against the government" manifesto nor is it trying to paint a broad stroke of what it means to work within either the formal or informal economy. Rather this paper will work to distinguish social interpretations of work more generally whilst also bringing to the forefront

the firsthand accounts of different types of works and the circumstances responsible for the engagement with these various labors.

Although the clean cut ideal of work would assert that everyone is capable of “real work,” that’s not anywhere close to the truth of the reality. The hard truth about informal work is that it makes up a large percentage of the population and is often overlooked, devalued, and dismissed in regards to conversations about what is considered “real work. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) states that approximately 60 percent of the global population engages in work in the informal economy. Although this statistic is most prevalent within emerging or developing economies, this number still represents a staggering truth that helps to frame our current economic standing and discrepancies surrounding the labor force. The conversation surrounding working and the economy as a whole is ripe with ideas, critiques and criticisms about the proficiency of its nature. Labor researchers and analysts Sabina Dewan and Ekkehard Ernst offer a description of this trickle down relationship in their article “Rethinking the World of Work.” Their point is cemented by making reference to the inevitable switch of demographics of the economy as a whole when stating, “Without large-scale job creation, surplus labor in developing economies will exert downward pressure on wages and working conditions. The result will be not only a deteriorating quality of life but also a ceiling on economic growth. We cannot expect the middle class in developing economies to keep expanding if young people cannot find jobs that pay middle-class wages....As in previous crises, young adults have been among the first affected by the social, educational, and economic disruption. (Dewan, Ekkehard pg.1)

Obviously, the United States isn't a “developing” country, but that doesn't mean its economy has no room for development. The argument remains the same, if there’s no movement

from higher up than everything beneath it will begin to crumble. This statement in and of itself is evidence enough as to why the rates of informal work and the individual pursuit of “real work” continue to be on the rise. Furthermore, I would like to make the point that, especially concerning my generation of young adults, the social understanding and inquiry of what is considered “real work” is something that plagues the minds of those all across their formative years. The notion of having a “real” job is inherently intertwined with capitalistic ideas of financial competitiveness, social hierarchy and dominance. Jobs within the gig economy or “shit jobs” are great examples of this. They are posited within the formal sector of the working economy but still represent monotonous, tedious, and easily expendable labor. Labor that more often than not has no health benefits, a barely survivable wage, and is met with social stigmatization. How many times have people used the colloquialism of becoming a “burger flipper” or “garbage man” in order to scare another into striving for success. Even within the media, there are a plethora of examples depicting those who can’t hold down a job as lacking in general life skills or as an overall simpleton. I think back to an early episode of “Jimmy Neutron” wherein Jimmy and his two friends are plagued with having to look for a job. Of course, the young teens can’t work in a white collar office so their next best option is working at the local fast food restaurant. Anyone who’s heard of Jimmy Neutron knows that his defining character trait is his intelligence and throughout the episode the notion of intelligence in relation to “gig-work” is laid out very explicitly. Jimmy Neutron is essentially “too smart” to work in the restaurant while his half-brained friends excel and even thrive in their new working environment. Although this is nothing more than a cartoon, the implications of who should be able to work in such an environment carries a very real and frankly backhanded undertone. If the producers wanted to make the message any clearer, all they’d be missing is big and bold lettering across the

screen saying “WE NEED STUPID PEOPLE TO WORK HERE.” There’s an undeniable connection between the social implication of being “unintelligent” or “skill-less” and working a gig. In all actuality, this flood of workers seeking temporary forms of work stems from a downward economic push rather than a lack of intelligence, ambition, or financial security from any chosen demographic as we’ve come to believe. The relationship to finding work or even different types of work being able to develop is nothing close to a black and white issue. There are several overlapping and underlying factors responsible for the tangled web that sits before us today. Dewan and Ekkehard skim the top of the iceberg when stating, “From e-commerce to the gig economy, consumers are increasingly tapping the internet to connect with goods and services from the safety of their homes... The gig economy’s low barriers to entry present new employment opportunities—and new hazards—for developing economies. The danger is that the bulging supply of young and low-skilled workers drawn to platforms is likely to exceed the demand for their services as data processors, customer service representatives, and ride-hailing service drivers... Not only will these workers frequently find themselves “gigless”—that is, underemployed—but they will likely face downward pressure on working conditions. Evidence from countries where an increasing share of workers compete on gig platforms confirms that wages are getting squeezed. And the assumption that most gig workers were previously in poor-quality informal work doesn’t always hold.” (Dewan, Ekkehard pg.1) Here a key factor in the examination of the work economy is displayed. This relationship is not exclusive to one part of the world, rather anywhere and everywhere there are people working amongst one another. As stated previously though, more factors remain at play in this structure.

In addition to who these jobs are made readily available to, what is necessary for one to assert themselves within a particular field, and what I argue is the most important; the education

leading up to a career or trade choice are among the most important steps in understanding your future of working. When I say education, I'm not just referring to schools but also forms of education through experience as well. One of the key points made throughout my multiple interviews was the matter of learning what work was prior to being able to engage when the time finally came.

METHODOLOGIES

As stated previously, over the better part of a year I've been conducting qualitative research in relation to the informal economy and informal work. More specifically I've conducted multiple in person interviews with people in my life who have experience working in both realms of formal and informal work. For my field site I've chosen to centralize my focus around that of my hometown of Long Island, NY; more specifically Uniondale. Throughout my conducting of the interviews, I made it a point to not influence the narrative of my subjects and rather let them share their stories to the depths they're willing to delve. In giving a voice to the stories often left untold, my aim is to give perspective to a series of life decisions, circumstances, and intentions that have influenced the ways in which people view labor as a whole. Although the focus of this paper concerns the worksphere, it will rely on the personal narratives surrounding work to help form a fully detailed story. In addition to talking about certain socioeconomic and political factors that play an integral role in the development of a specific type of living I also would like to bring to the forefront varying environmental factors, significant representations throughout various forms of media, as well as personal motivations and or inhibitions that have influenced my chosen subjects decisions in regards to work as a whole. The names of my chosen subjects have been changed as a means of protecting their identities in addition to upholding proper moral and ethical treatment concerning information of their pasts. I understand there is only so much I can do to flesh out a proper narrative of work experience that I will be referencing throughout this paper. Nonetheless, I will try my best in giving the most rich and diverse explanation of the very complex web that makes up the majority of the subject matter I will be addressing throughout.

CHAPTER I: “The Road Less Traveled”

The first interview I conducted was with Gold, a long time friend who has ample experience from an early age working within the formal economy as well as the informal economy. Gold, in my eyes, was the definition of an atypical businessman; but a businessman nonetheless. I always joked that Gold could sell an Inuit ice if he had to. We grew up in neighboring towns and knew each other by name alone in middle school. By the time we got to high school, Gold and myself were fully acquainted and becoming real friends. We broke bread, shared artistic visions, sports fields, and spent entirely too much time racking our brains about what the “next move” was with one another. Having spent so much time with one another I was able to witness Gold’s day to day and began to learn who he was as a person. I knew Gold had a lot more life experience than most people our age at that time. I also knew there was real insight behind the life that I’ve watched Gold lead. There was an undeniable aura to him. He was real, one of the realest people I’d met. Gold had the personality and soul of someone who’s been around for much longer than I have. In retrospect, there was so much more to Gold than I knew or ever thought to even ask prior to sitting him down for our interview. As I sat prepared for the interview though, I thought to myself, “make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar.” This was a potent anecdote I received from my anthropology professor who played a large role in guiding this project. I looked at Gold, even after having lived the life he was about to tell me, the youth in his face was palpable. The hungry, smooth talking, jack of all trades I knew sat driver side and prepared our conversation with a joint, ready to reminisce about steps that led him to where he stands now.

Gold started his life in Mexico as a young child and then was soon relocated to El Salvador where he would spend the majority of his childhood life. When reminiscing about his growing up, he reflects on moments of purity and forgetful childhood misbehavior. Punches thrown on a school yard, followed by scoldings from teachers, and then ass whoopings as soon as you get home. You can almost visualize the events transpiring as if you were still in grade school. At the age of 8, Gold was made aware of who his mother was, where she was, and the fact that he'd now have his life uprooted in order to make it to her. Gold thinks back to being young and having to conceptualize his mom along with his older brother leaving for the United States. It wasn't until right before his 8th birthday that Gold was made aware of the relationship with his mom, realizing the woman he had spent most of his life with up until this point was actually his aunt. This was one of the more prevalent and pivotal circumstances in Gold's growing up as I came to find out. I watched Gold think back to times of the past with his chin tilted to the sky and his eyes trailing from corner to corner as if he was digging for the memories stored away somewhere deep in his head.

Gold- "The way that process went was like..it was uncle driving, my aunt, my cousin(s) and then me... we were just in the back chillin...I remember this day like it was yesterday bro. I gave my cousin a quarter like just have this quarter because they tellin me I'm bouta go somewhere...They tellin me like you bouta go somewhere and I'm like ight, I know y'all live in a different country so I know I don't give a shit about this quarter so I give to him like, "hold this down."...there was a gas station we met at...my uncle was sitting down with my aint they were just talking..when they decided to get up they shook hands or whatever and my uncle gave me \$5...mind you, \$5 in El Salvador is like bro whaaaat? You're rich! So I'm like "yo everybody get

whatever you want I got y'all," but my aunt was like "nah...nah you're gonna need that"...like for wha-what ima need this for?"(shared laughter)

From early on, the concept of money and its relationship to the world impacted Gold's view of the world. Additionally, taking into consideration the political, cultural, and social nature of developing countries and economies, the relation to money is strained; as is the relationship with almost every country around the world. Our dependence on money as an item functions as the key driving force behind most decisions we take in the course of our lives. Many studies have been published concerning people's relationship to money and the complexities of its nature. Professor and writer, Mark Oleson expands on this idea in his writing, "Exploring the Relationship Between Money Attitudes and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." In it he delineates the dynamic between one's individual needs, societies needs, and their relationship to the nuanced and hardly transparent nature of money. Oleson states, "To some, money is the root of all evil. To others, the lack of money is perceived to be the basis of all their troubles. Any attempt to make sense of the confusing and paradoxical attitudes that people have toward money is a monumental undertaking. It seems that for some people money is the most important thing in the world. Yet they pretend it is the least important. The worship of money and the condemnation of money exist side by side, sometimes even in the same individual." (Oleson pg. 85) Money is more than an object and its impact and influence on the world is insurmountable. This dynamic exceeds restrictions of age, gender, race, and class. Money in essence, is life. It is completely intertwined with us and is almost imprinted into our behavior as an innate desire. Money is the talk of the town and has been since its conception. Money is power. Money is protection. From

this simple interaction alone, Gold was initiated into a new understanding of the reality around him. Gold's continues,

“Boom, she's (aunt) like-...so I came in my uncle's truck, they like get into that person's car...I'm like why...she's like we're gonna meet you...we're gonna go somewhere and we're gonna meet you there... I'm like ight, so we're leaving the gas station and we drive to this path...we drive to the right and they drive to the left and I'm just in the back seat looking back like “yo, where they going”... they (the drivers) like “they're about to meet us, they're going somewhere, they're gonna do something then meet us...” we get to a little river and Im like what the fuck we doing here. They like, go with this man real quick, you're gonna cross the river...it was into Honduras. The guy asked me if I knew how to swim, I was like nah, so he was like put your clothes in a bag and climb on my shoulders and...you feel me? As soon as I got to Honduras on the other side of the river there was somebody like already waiting for me on a motorcycle...I don't remember the whole motorcycle..but it had a scorpion on the seat and shit...it was a fire motorcycle. He dead took me all the way to Guatemala...when I got to Guatemala, I spent the night there. They took me to a barn and in that barn I was in there just waiting and shit. They were like, “Yo you're gonna sleep here, we're gonna take you to see your uncle tomorrow.” So I was like ight bet, but at night I remember- I was like damn...I started crying that night bro on god, like what if I don't see my mom...like I was fucked.... nahh

Me- “Cuz you're just in it...”

Gold- “Yeahh, I'm just going with cuz at the end of the day I trust my mom.... But as this shit is going though, it's starting to not feel right and it just feels a lil' iffy like...I don't know what's going on I start thinking about it more...I think I cried that whole night...the next morning I got taken to my Uncle.

Me- “Did you get any sleep?”

Gold- “Nah, not at all...I remember them coming into the barn and me being ready... we took off mad early cuz mind you, they crossed me into Guatemala...from Honduras into Guatemala...so that whole process took like a whole day...so we took off early on that thing. From the motorcycle we actually took a bus for a little bit...I remember that was the first time I was ever on a coach bus and on top of that it was the first time I seen people get on the bus and try to sell you shit...like sell you fruits and shit. From there I was with a different guy already... and from there he took me to my uncle and he was waiting for me at the bus station.

After arriving at the bus station, Gold further tells me how he reunited with his aunt, uncle, and cousins. This was the first time since he was born that Gold was back “home.” The first half of Gold’s journey was completed, and for the first time in however many days since his journey had begun, he was able to let his guard down. Even if only for a short time he was able to relax.

Gold- “I knew them so...you know I felt a little more comfortable”

Gold continues on to speak fondly of his time spent with his family in Mexico. He was shown different restaurants, foods, and the town he was born in. It was an impactful experience to say the least. The temporary vacation was comfortable living for Gold. As we dove deeper into our conversation, Gold and I shared laughter over stories of falling into cactuses off the backs of stubborn donkeys, visiting seemingly endless arcades with cousins, and journeying to far out familial ranchos to capture and kill pigs for dinner. Gold thinks back with the same childlike wonderment of the lifestyle he saw his family members living while there. Expensive cars, big properties of land, and an acute feeling of financial freedom added to the lavish lifestyle Gold was made aware of.

Gold - “One of my cousins, he was into the... he was in the mafia, he was in the narco shit..so he was in the cartel. Basically that nigga had anything and everything he wanted bro like...like bro...he made it possible that my uncle had a big ass house and somebody lived to the left of him and he wanted that house and somehow he got that house...he put MAD cars in the back bro..Mad cars but this nigga was like mad reckless so he would fuck ALL of them up. So in the back it was damn near a junkyard instead of a car show” (shared laughter)

Me- “So he got a new car every time....”

Gold - “YEAH like everytime he would get a new car like he had a viper, he liked that muscle shit.. He had a corvette..”

I was able to understand from these shared lines alone, one of the more prominent factors behind Gold's view of working generally, but I additionally understood the manner in which he carried himself.

After spending a few more days with his family, Gold began the latter half of his journey driving in the back of a truck through Mexico, past the border and up into Texas. From here, Gold was picked up by a family and spent about 3 days with them; making friends and having rambunctious fun with the youngest child. His time in Texas was short lived, as in no longer than a week Gold was told by his temporary caretaker that he'd finally get to meet this mystified and figmented "mom" he'd been told so much about. The reason this exhausting journey started in the first place. Finally it was over and Gold had touched down in his new home. From Mexico, to El Salvador, to Honduras, to Guatemala, back to Mexico, and finishing in New York. As harrowing as this story was for me to hear, and as impactful as I know it had been for Gold to live, the impetus of this project had yet to be met fully. I was here to learn more about Gold's working experience and what he thought about working generally. How was he affected by the types of work he engaged with? What were his motives and views on working? And most importantly, what did he feel when thinking about working? I start to dig further.

Me- "What was your experience working the formal economy, when did you start working, what was your first job

Gold- My first job was a construction job and I used to get paid 60 dollars a day and I started when I was like 9 years old. That was my first job ever because I knew a lot of people that had construction companies and things like that. I was a helper so at the time they were only paying

me 60 dollars a day and you know for me that was more than enough because I was young. As I grew older I kept getting construction jobs because I felt like that was all I knew how to do. At one point I just kept looking for these jobs. After a while.....construction jobs, they were cool and after a while I started getting paid more money because I started learning how to do more but the labor was killing me. I got scoliosis (shared laugh) so either way it was fuckin me up. I started getting into catering. It was off the books and it was faster money and a better environment where I didn't have work as hard or feel like i'm killing myself

Me- And how old were you when you got into catering?

Gold- At that point when I started I was probably like 13 at the time because I started catering at a bar. I only got started because when someone brought me in they thought that I was 18 already because I used to work with people at other catering halls and because I was there serving alcohol and all of this, they thought I was old enough to do that you know but really they were just cool enough to let me. I had people come up to me like hey do you wanna cater at my spot and at the time I didn't know what I was getting myself into I'd just be like, "how much are you gonna pay me and where at" and they'd shoot me an address and tell me how much they'd pay me and I'd just show up and wouldn't ever know if I was working with bottles or picking up food or whatever it was I was just showing up. It was just mad bars. I used to go to queens and tell my mother I had work at a construction job so I would leave really early and come back in the afternoon or really late and at that point she basically knew I had two jobs but she didn't know about the bars and all that because she wouldn't let me. Sometimes I'd tell her I was going to the construction job then the catering job but really I'd be at the bar the whole night and the whole

day. I used to be in queens and really didn't know how to take the trains then. I thought the trains ran 24/7..... 13 all the way up til like 16 I was just doing mad different catering halls and shit like that. I was always like.....noooooooooo....she just peed. (Referring to a text that notified Gold's dog peed on his favorite pair of sweats.)

Me-Damn...I wanna jump backwards for a second, where were you located when you had your first construction job.

Gold- Uniondale, I came straight to Uniondale when I came from my country. So I stayed in Uniondale and I'm still in Uniondale (chuckles to self)

Me - So after 16 you said you were working catering, was there any work you did after that, any jobs that were different than construction or catering

Gold- Hell yeah, after 16 I got a job at sonic and it was pretty litt. At first they weren't jacking me because I didn't have working papers but the thing was we got cool because i went there one day when they just opened up and they needed people so they gave the interview right then and there and they liked me so they asked when I was ready start so I was like, “shiiiiit today if you let me” so they let me start that same day and without asking for any documents and anything like that they let me work with putting counting my hours and they let me work, I was a good worker. I would be fast, I was on the roller skates, I knew my shit so.....(phone rings)

Talk to me.....10 mins (business talk about manager) I aint gon lie, I was making bread, and at the time they pay you every two weeks but the thing was your tips, depending on how good you

do you like you get paid damn near what you worked the for the whole day, so it was like I was getting twice the pay and at this is around the time I started to sell carts and edibles and shit, remember this was highschool and shit. So like at the time I'm making a decent amount of money so I was like fuck construction, I never wanna do construction again, never again, but at the time I was still in highschool and I didnt know what was gonna happen which was me getting kicked out (of highschool). Me getting kicked out of highschool and then leaving my *unintelligible* out of my house was just like whoa, sonic is cool but I wont be able to get that many hours due to the fact that I'm a young nigga still like they can't do that it's illegal and they're not gonna go against that so I had to go back to construction but from there I was just tight even though I was making 800 or 900 sometimes 1100 every two weeks and bro like im 16-17 this is amazing for me plus the tips, plus the trap like its amazing when you good bro, like GOOD. So all of that shit, obviously I was buying shit for myself and taking care of myself but everything wasn't on me yet. My mom was still helping me out with things, feeding me and shit all of that. You know like after leaving the crib and getting kicked out of highschool like it hit me more bro, you know obviously my money management wasn't good at the time. I was just fucking money up bro and like, I went to construction and kept it going til I was like 17-18 and from there I started trapping and ever since I havent had a job ever. Since like 18 probably...yeah.

Me- And you've been relying on your own sources of income?

Gold- Yeah basically like ever since.

Me- When you did have experiences working in the formal economy, were there any benefits that you found being there?

Gold- I've always wished I had my actual paperwork because you can get rich off credit and the way you get more money and all that crazy shit like.....you can really become rich off credit by knowing how to build your credit the right way...and I feel like with people having alot of that pay stub shit going and having to like...the government knows how much you make and shit... I be making mad bread just so the government can see that, and obviously they're gonna tax me but at the same time ima get hella bread back and my credit is gonna be good because my credit is really high and from that I can use my credit to fund my business, open up a business with the LLC and I can just.. Ya feel me... that right there would've helped me out alot because of income and I was always really money hungry like I was always out...yeah there was a benefit, there was that benefit...but then what I didn't like is that damn I have to be here for a whole hour and get paid \$14 that hour like fuckk... fuckk bro...

Me- Yeah.... yeah its ass

Gold- At this point I rather go like, play scratch offs or some shit..rather than make \$14 an hour I could probably make like double it...I was mad as hell bro. I was like fuck that shit. I'm not working now... After I got the construction job I was like, “fuck that shit... I’m not going back to working for nobody...for no on the books shit” and I just I never went back to that after I got the construction job and then after I got the job I literally tried for like half a year and it got to the point where like it was just during the cold and I didnt have a car like I had to be at Westbury and

like I thugged it out alot for like half that year by walking there, taking cabs there, taking the bus there, taking the bike there. It was bad for my health. I dont even have health insurance and I'm killing myself for somebody who isn't gonna give a fuck about when I cant work no more, he's gonna replace me....

Gold was on track to becoming the self-sufficient man of his imagination. Though this wasn't his imagination. Gold had lived it, seen it, engaged with it. He had all the makings, motivation, and ambition to push himself beyond what he was given or had prior in life. He was someone who had his fair share of the hard grind in life and decided it was enough. Gold was at a point where he was learning how to get what he wanted through his own means and was facing it head on with full intent. He knew himself enough to know that he didn't want to work under someone else. He also knew the road ahead was the one less traveled, but in the face of survival and for the sake of success he was willing to take the walk.

CHAPTER II: “My Blood”

Picture a young black boy. He’s no different than me or you. He wants to be loved, nurtured, and understood. Unfortunately the world around us doesn’t function off of ideals. This black boy was raised in a decent neighborhood around a decent group of friends. Something still was missing. To put our finger on the exact “thing” that wasn’t present in his life is a complex problem to deal with. It could’ve been his father’s anger. The anger that was present prior to the black boy being conceived. It wasn’t his fault but life is an equal opportunity asshole to be put bluntly. He took this onto himself, and slowly but surely the innocent child that just wanted to be loved, nurtured, and understood retreated into himself. Walls made for his protection began their construction. It’s heartbreaking to look at the path he walks now and understand it could’ve been different. Talking to him now, glimpses of that little black boy shine through but the callous and remorseless man that he has taught himself to be makes up his exterior. He’s made attempts to try and get past the image of what he should be but with no healthy ideal in his life, his behavior becomes patternized. He continues the cycle unintentionally. He’s not malicious. He’s not an inherently violent or bad human. Growing up, his main lens into the world was one of survival so the actions he partakes in now are still through that lens of survival. He totes a gun and I can’t blame him. The growth that was supposed to be made past that little black boy was stunted, so survival is the only thing he knows now. He sells weed to “get money” because his record can’t get him a job in the formal economy. Still seeking that love and nurturing as a man, he associates with some unsavory figures, at least in the public’s eye. Some may call him a criminal without knowing how or why he got there. The thing is, I’ve grown up with the little black boy. I see his capacity for tenderness and in my actions I try to show him that he can be different. Even the music he listens to doesn’t allow him explore the depths of his emotion. Nonetheless, this black

boy is a part of me and no matter what society defines him as or how he is perceived I know what's underneath the shell. I also know what got him to that point so maybe my bias is definitely in his favor. I say again it's not his fault. The way of the world favors no one and everyone is up for grabs.

I chose to start this chapter with this semi-fictionalized narrative of the unlabeled black boy because this story represents characteristics that were all too common within my growing up. Granted this project isn't about me, but nonetheless my experience is the driving force behind sharing the perspectives of an underbelly that would otherwise be ignored or only so accurately fleshed out. While this isn't a paper exclusively trying to tackle the conundrum that is blackness in America, it cannot be ignored that blackness in America functions as an obstacle for development or success. The societal influences, media reinforced imagery, and lack of general acknowledgment towards the skewed nature of bigger biases are all factors that play into the dynamic of working in relation to blackness. Growing up as a black or brown man anywhere comes with confusing implications of identity, security, and overall existence that I feel play an important role in the analysis of the relationship to working. I thought it prudent to bring attention to this idea before I delve deeper into the subject matter.

The second interview I conducted was with my older brother, Balla. Balla is my blood. In all actuality, when I first envisioned this project, Balla was the initial inspiration. I'd watched him traverse the working sphere within both the formal and informal economy. Since the moment I was able to understand what a brother was or meant, he was that. We were both victims of circumstance in that we didn't get to spend as much time as either of us really wanted throughout our childhood. Nevertheless, there are few people as close to me as he is. Being an older brother, Balla took on the responsibility of making sure I was up to par on the game he'd

drop for me. There existed a lifetime's worth of stories, experiences, and feelings shared between the two of us that made our connection inseparable. He made sure that I wasn't lost in the crowd, doing anything I wasn't supposed to be doing, or above all else; never forgetting he was always there for me. Balla was born and raised in Long Island, New York. He was the oldest of four siblings split between two families. I don't know that the weight of being the eldest particularly affected his development but what I do know is that outside of us, (his family) Balla was something of a solitary figure. Growing up, Balla was a loving and affectionate child. Sporting a personality that was full of hugs and innocent curiosity. In his adolescence, Balla began to retreat ever so slightly into himself. That sweet and innocent child who dawned consistent open mouth smiles and even more open arms of warmth was overshadowed by the street tempered and visibly colder man that I knew in my adulthood. As an adult, Balla wasn't concerned with handouts or foreign opinions. He also wasn't much of a talker. He was a go-getter. I'd watched thousands of dollars make their way in and out of the hands of Balla in the name of a "come-up" or his next money venture. That's where his head was. That's where it had been for I don't know how many years at this point. My view of Balla and his perceived motivations represented but a fraction of what made up the person I was currently seated in front of. I sat again, prepared to unlearn the person I'd grown up with in hopes of seeing what exactly ran through the head of my brother.

Balla- "I've had actual jobs like U.P.S... um P.C. Richards, I done did a lot of warehouse jobs before so I understand about taxes and everything."

Me- "What was your first job?"

Balla- "UPS, 2014."

Me- “And how was that?”

Balla- “Very tiring.”

Me- “What's your experience working in the informal economy and how does it compare to work in the formal economy?”

Balla- “You make your own hours, sometimes doing what you do you, possibly could make more than the average person with a job but...it has its goods and bads...just risk over reward type shit.”

Me- “What are some of the negatives?...The downside I would say.”

Balla- “Developing the mindset of, “I can make this back.”

Me- “What was the biggest deciding factor in trading formal work for informal work? What made you make the transition from working within the formal economy to the informal economy?”

Balla- “It was really more of my wants than my needs. I wanted a lot more than I was given. I was like you know I had to make my own money. I tried a job that wasn't it.”

Me- “What's the end goal I guess you could say, not a particular goal... it could be a point that you're trying to reach but, what do you like I received or I will consider this and I said this in my other interview is that I would consider this so I can form of entrepreneurial work you know I'm saying is where do you want to take this? What do you want for yourself?”

Balla- “Stability, I'm looking for like you know a certain type of lifestyle that you know I don't think you could necessarily get with a nine to five.”

Balla's concern in regards to working was making it exactly what he wanted. Having worked in the formal economy and to be more specific, the physically laborious side of the formal economy, Balla knew that he didn't want to spend his days doing essentially “grunt”

labor. Another theme that I witnessed being carried over interview to interview was the notion of becoming one's own boss. From the way each of my interviewees spoke, there's something inherently albeit subtly demeaning or rather domineering about the nature of working underneath someone else. This isn't to say all relationships of boss to employee are explicitly dominating, but rather in engagements of what would be considered monotonous physical labor, the dynamic can surely be perceived in that light. Professor of the Work Organization at the University of Leicester Management Center and researcher Colin C. Williams, alongside Director of Education for the Strategy, International Business and Entrepreneurship (SIBE) group, Dr. Sara Nadin further explores this relation of working to interpersonal and individual perspectives regarding entrepreneurial work in their writing, "Entrepreneurship and the Informal Economy: An Overview." Williams and Nadin further the claim that one's concern about creating their own schedule or becoming their boss is softly rooted in the exploration of one's identity when stating, "As Gerxhani (2004) asserts, many "choose to participate in the informal economy because they find more autonomy, flexibility and freedom in this sector than in the formal one." Similarly, Snyder (2004), in her study of 50 informal entrepreneurs in New York City's East Village, finds that all the informal entrepreneurs she studied did so out of choice, such as to set their careers on a new path, to transform their work identity or to reveal their true selves." (Williams, Nadin, p. 367) The act of working for one's self functions as a furthering of self dependence, but using entrepreneurship as a foundation almost doubles this function. To provide for yourself with something that you've created, exists in a space just beyond working for an unrelated business, corporation, or institution. There's a specific type of freedom that emerges from this relationship that motivates people of all ages, races, and classes. I believe, and as I'm sure many others would agree, that the feeling of becoming self-sufficient in that way would sit relatively high on a

“satisfying accomplishment” scale. Without becoming too philosophical, there’s more to it than the money but a self actualization that is beneficial to one’s growth. Though, while addressing the nature of delving into entrepreneurship it would be naive to ignore that accessibility to entrepreneurship is limited. Not many individuals are privileged enough to know the freedom of being able to tap out of the economy and create what they want. Even though Balla and myself understood this fact, there was still a feeling of trying to access it nonetheless. I feel as though this is what might’ve lived behind Balla’s motivation for his choice of work so I continue to him with another question,

Me- “Generally what would you say is the attraction to working informally compared to working within the informal economy?”

Balla- “Probably just like the money that you can make.”

Me- “And that money is made after a certain point depending on like how you choose to follow your business plan. What's a big deterrent for you working formally?”

Balla- “I would have to say I like being on my own time, and I just...especially like there’s 24-hours out the day and they want you to sleep for 8 hours and they want you to work for 8 hours only have another 8 hours to do what I want for my life how does that work?”

Me- “It doesn't” (shared laughter)

Balla- “You can't take 8 hours out the day and say you know ima dedicate this and you know I wanna be my own person. I would like to do what I wanna do when I wanna do it, not like... Oh damn I worked my ass off for the same job for two years and if I wanna take a month off or something youll get fired and they'll replace you immediately with no hesitation about it no Oh

you been with the company so long and we've developed a relationship with you, they're not gonna care"

Me- "You're like a cog in the machine I'd say, easily replaceable. Is there anything you would've wished gave a better grasp on working generally or about one particular form of work?(formally or informally) Is there something you wish you were taught about either side?"

Balla- "I was told multiple times it's not all you see or hear about there's definitely more that comes with it so you its just...its kinda hard, informally it's just if I don't see myself as like...I didn't do the whole college thing and a lot of jobs want you to have experience with a degree and all of that and me personally I don't have that so what I tried to do was I applied for construction license...I got that done and all they required was a 8 hour training...I did that...On top of that now you have to look for someone that'll take you with no experience...So its like I just spent my money trying to get the license to make me like you know a working person...Do the right thing...that becomes hard and what else do you do?... Something in your life might be going on where it's like damn I just like I could wait to get the interviews but I could do so much...Like the 1st and 15th bills is due and time don't wait for anyone."

Me- "People don't work for nothing you know what I'm saying, so it's definitely money-driven working within the formal economy I would say is harder...it's different in the sense that you produce a lot more physical labor and tasks to get relatively the same amount of money where as was working for yourself by yourself you dictate your own hours and I guess depending on your flow of work you can like you said sometimes make more than what you would had you just been working you know a nine-to-five so what do you think about that? What do you think about pay rates relative to working formally and informally?"

Balla- "As of right now I think...I don't know how to say this but the pay rates are bad working formally. 15 a hour in a 8 hour shift...we can do the math right now...that's 120 dollars a day times that by a 5 day work week that's 600...600 a week. You might be a person that rents out for the week or for the month... on a monthly basis say you have a car with insurance that's not enough to pay all of that and that's New York's minimum wage right now 15...I know someone that just had a job they were getting paid \$9 an hour. Informally now right?...it's not as steady where you know you're going to make something on a certain day like where all right even if you did have that little 600 you could be like okay I'm gonna save this... informally it's still you got that cloud in your head like damn am I going to make this? Probably not...and you might have a bad month...2-3 months, you could have a bad year or two but you know my whole thing is like never get discouraged you know never give up...it's always better somewhere I'll definitely get better...if you're going through hell don't stop because you're still in hell. Actually I used to work this valet job...I used to see the other cars and I just used that as my motivation so I like that about it I met some good people there that I'm still in contact with. You know just probably like you know how you feel about yourself at that moment like you know informally when you...when you get to a certain point you feel like you done did it like I'm here. I never had that feeling working a job formally...you might be making the money but you're upset going to work all the time clocking them hours...come home tired like I can't wait to find something new...I'm not going to say I don't have my bad days either...you might have money informally still think this ain't even what I wanna do now you're stressed. There's always the what ifs, watching over your back...that's about it tho."

In addition to speaking with Balla about his experience working, I was also able to speak with his partner, Doll, who has spent her time working exclusively within the formal economy. I

didn't know Doll for that long relative to the others I interviewed for this project but nonetheless she gave me insight to the realm of work she experienced herself. As much as I thought I understood the nature of working and where exactly discrepancies lay between opinions, through Doll I further understood the complex relationship to working. Doll experienced most if not all of her work experience through the formal economy but there was still a part of her that simultaneously wished for the same thing Balla had expressed. A comfortable lifestyle, something without the stress of being a victim to another's schedule.

Doll- "I mean I've always encountered good jobs, like my first job was pretty good. I was making a decent amount of money for my age, for somebody who didn't have bills you know what I'm saying...?"

Me- "What was like the driving force behind working in the formal economy?"

Doll- "I mean I just feel like I always told myself like eventually I don't want to have a boss like this is just like a stepping stone for me to get to where I need to be."

Me- "What have been your reservations if any towards working in the informal economy?"

Doll- "They really don't give a fuck about you.....it feels like do not take you're sick days... your vacation days because you want to look good in front of the manager.... they'll literally like... replace you in a heartbeat. I would say don't even put in your 2 weeks because the job wouldn't give you 2 weeks before they fire you...like they'd fire right on the spot and sometimes they start acting funny after you give in your 2 weeks. Like really try to get your own shit going."

Me- "Have you ever worked off the books to any degree?"

Doll- "I mean...I've done my share of things."

(breaks into laughter)

Me- “So with that, you have your choice...”

Doll- “I mean it's kinda like when shit hits the fan, cuz its like I had just came from upstate and finished my course but I'm not from here so it's like I had to get my residence card so I wasn't able to do that like I was kind of on other people's time... I had to do what I had to do.”

Me- “This is a point I wanted to get at because I think sometimes it's a necessity for survival to work informally and just based on the status quo that's often seen as a negative thing.”

Doll- “My first job was off the books, I worked at a Haitian restaurant where it was like mostly Haitians that worked there and didn't have their papers so they would try to get over on them...but it was definitely hard labor.”

Me- “You were paid off the books but that was a formal job setting?”

Doll- “Yeah.”

Me- “Were the workers that worked there informally treated differently?”

Doll- “Absolutely, they spoke to them any way they wanted, they really didn't get breaks like that, they told them they had to eat as the shift went. They would take out their payments and shared tips...they wouldn't get as much of the shared tips that they were supposed to be”

Me- “What do you wish you would've been taught about working generally?”

Doll- “You literally have to do what you have to do for yourself, sometimes we tend to not do what we wanna do because we think of other people but you gotta do what you gotta do to get yourself situated...you can't keep getting distracted, it has to be a tunnel vision or you can't keep thinking of your manager and stuff like that. Sometimes...I've been at a job for so long and it's like I don't wanna leave because we're cool but if it were the other way around they'd drop you like (snaps fingers) that. I think everybody should be their own boss, I think there's money out here for everybody. Especially the black community, there's so many chain stores where the

people work together but within the black community there's too much competition for them to come together. If we came together we could do this shit.”

Listening to Doll speak, painted a picture of both the reality of the lives being lived and an ideal life that could be lived. To be completely honest there does exist a lack of unity within the black community that holds us back. This analysis isn't to degrade or speak little of the dynamic of black community but rather it's bringing attention to the factors that play into our everyday lives. It's more than necessary for us to come together and make better a circumstance that we were all born into.

CHAPTER III: “You Taught Me”

Ocean was the last of the interviewees and the one who had lived through the most. There was so much time behind the life Ocean had known. He'd seen so many types of work between himself and others. Experiences inside and outside the formal economy from a young age in a time where there was less public acknowledgment towards the harsh reality that was living. I realized the words I was being exposed laid almost 1 to 1 with the previous interview entries. There was someone who stood with their own desires, aspirations, and plans of a different type of life. Someone who had their fill of the way things were and even if they weren't able to live those thoughts of a completely free life, they could use me and this project as a vessel of information. Ocean wasn't old but he knew he wasn't a young man anymore. His face, etched with the scars of time and experience. The ever present bass and low rumble of his voice. One that I knew commanded respect and attention when presented. Ocean was on a pedestal in my life. I could simplify the relationship by saying it's only because Ocean is my father but I know there was more to it than that. Ever since I was little Ocean was the epitome of cool. Ocean was power. Ocean was my first notion of what a man could be. The initial parts of my personality were formed in replication of his own. The same way Gold's aura was felt by the people around him is the same way Ocean's was. It was indescribable. The charismatic charm and fluid tongue that switched between a poised fountain pen or razor sharp bowie knife was a characteristic I'd known my entire life. It was the thing that molded legendary stories heard in my youth. It was the thing that showed me you could make things happen in the world based on how you speak. The extroverted, headstrong, moving nature that I knew to a “T,” growing up was the one of the initial experiences into how the world required someone like him, someone like me to move.

Ocean- "My first job I was probably uhh...I worked at the liquor store. Henry Street liquor store in Hempstead right up the road. I was doin stock. Think I mighta been in like 10th grade?...That was the first time I had like a real serious job..Like 10th or 11th grade...11th grade probably. But it was fun you know...we were in charge of stock...go to the back drink the beers (shared laughter)...meet all the bums on Henry Street...bring them the cans...you know...it was outside...you know...so this was before they had those machines...so you had to know the difference between the companies to separate it...a whole lotta bees...we learned bees love beer for some reason. So the beer cans were full of bees inside the separating place...the smell of beer after a while... would stink horrible! Who knows where they'd get these cans from...the money was good but after a while it was like...(sigh)you get tired of the atmosphere over there and so I left

Me- And that was a W-2 thing or they just brought you on?

Ocean- Nah, it was off the books I don't even think they asked my age or anything, they were just looking for people to...you know stock just they needed people to work stock...basically, high turnaround...no one stayed over there too long.

Me- It was a gig thing?

Ocean- Yeah, yeah...you know

Me- What about after that

Ocean After that...um you know, another job I did have was um, my actual first real job was probably working for my father when he had a record store...yeah. Might've been experience, I didn't get paid for it so that's the reason I'm saying it wasn't a real job it was just practice. We had to do everything real except get paid you know(chuckles to self)...we did everything, had to show up everyday, just was no such thing as a paycheck you know...

Me- It's like this is for the family

Ocean- Yeah, basically...and that was our contribution. Sell records...it was kinda like fun work.

It was the first time I kinda did learn you know...you could make money doing something that you like and it didn't actually seem like work. On top of it, was working for your family also good experience

Me- And it makes it a bit easier than working under someone...someone that you don't know

Ocean- Yeah...I think it was like 87' ...88' ...golden era of hip hop...you know all the good music is coming out...

Me- What would you say is a major choice behind working formally or informally? Looking back or right now...Either one.

Ocean- Looking back, it was uh...it was more about where you get a check from...where you could get that money from...like I said, the turn around...you didn't plan on staying anywhere for too long...you kinda just wanted to get some money so you could you know...get some sneakers, a tape, a CD...you know that's when I was younger so it was easier, you didn't need as much money. It's consistent cuz when you're older no bills, all the money you're making can be used for yourself [but] then you have the other side of the coin where you know, you have the kids who weren't assemble to get a job and they wanted money also or they wanted those potato chips or the sneakers or the cassette you know... so maybe they had to go bag up groceries, or try to find anything that they could do...hustlin', sellin drugs or weed, you know things like that...people do anything for money and that's wha- that's that as you got older you look back and say you know what when it comes time to get money...people are willing to do anything and everything for money...whether it's the oldest profession, sellin' pleasure in exchange for money...it's always looked at if there's a fair exchange there's no robbery...no robbery. That's

how some people grew up and that's the reality...that's actually how society makes it. Looking back now, everyone didn't get an education, doesn't have certain qualifications, but you still need money...the bills are still gonna come...

There is an important message or rather an understanding that I took from this nugget of information. Everything isn't available to everyone and sometimes actions that would be classified as negative or brushed off as "the way things are," are done not for inherent malicious intent. Rather they are engaged with because there isn't an equity amongst situations or circumstances. Anthropologist and writer Phillippe Bourgois addresses this relationship of working in his book, "In Search of Respect." In it he details the toils and hardships associated with trying to work and finding unsavory work within the crack riddled "Barrio" of Harlem, NY. Bourgois goes on to state, "They were usually fired from these jobs, but they treated their return to the world of street dealing as a triumph of free will and resistance on their part. A straightforward refusal to be exploited in the legal labor market pushes them into the crack economy and into substance abuse. At the same time, however, becoming a crack seller is by no means the voluntarily triumphalist decision that many street dealers claim it to be." (Bourgois p. 251) What Bourgois was highlighting here is a similar albeit more drastic representation of the plight of the worker in an area where they often left to be forgotten. Granted, Bourgois is touching on the subject matter of dealing, in respects to "after work" plans but nonetheless he is positing a situation that is all too familiar to those with no plan B. The embrace of the street life and culture that comes as second nature to those raised in it will always be left as an option to make it, somewhere at least. The experience lived here cannot be denied its demanding and ruthless intent, but I believe that the question remains, "what is the alternative for those who aren't presented with an alternative? As I stated previously there aren't a bountiful amount of

options laid out for everyone to choose from, and when it comes to the subject of survival, many are willing to do whatever it takes in order to keep going. Our conversation continues,

Me- It's like... The need for money is universal

Ocean- Yeah...Definitely, definitely...

Me- And I think that's something you taught me...you can have the education but you also have the talent. Money is the thing people are after so if you can get paid doing something you like...do it

Ocean- Right

Me- I know a lot of time has passed since you were a kid but do you think a lot has changed in terms of what people are looking for through jobs? At least among my generation of young adults do you think there's an emphasis placed or rather, should there be an emphasis placed on working formally or informally?

Ocean- To be honest, times have changed so much...like I said I worked at a record store, they don't even make records anymore...you know what I mean, a whole industry and a time has changed so rapidly from when I was your age till now...things are constantly changing...we get stuck in our ways...when you get older you can't really see the future too much unless you're dealing with the new generation and seeing what they want and what they need...that's how the future goes on, what the younger generations needs...how they want it to come to them...so now industries are changed...you have a car, you can do Uber, when I was young you'd never think of just letting strangers into your car or have a phone or an app...so there's just certain things that wasn't even available...I think now there's more opportunities because i think more things are being created but at the same time there's always a gap between the people who are getting

educated, the people who are gonna get opportunities, and how much you're gonna get paid for even doing the job...so people start to decide, I don't wanna give that much time for that amount of money...there's so many different ways you could generate cash flow...its kinda like my way of earning money is extinct like a dinosaur...it's a new wave, new era, new time...the only thing that's always the same is, if you have a talent...you know what I mean, you have a skill...you perfect that craft, master that skill...there's so many different ways you can earn an income as long as you keep your eyes open, your brain...stay creative. You can't let anybody tell you how to actually make money...because whatever might work for them might not work for you but you just gotta try...

Although he wasn't part of the new generation, Ocean had the propensity to give me the "sauce" for the game. No different than had told me my entire life, there was always something he knew he could share with me and I'd take it as my own. As much as one could say, "easier said than done" I realize there's just as much difficulty in being able to find the words and pass that knowledge on to whoever needs it. Ocean wasn't giving me a cut and dry solution. None of my interviewees had tried either. Everything that they were speaking of was rooted in the seemingly indestructible mold we'd been cast into. Yet and still there was no evidence to support the idea that anyone I'd interviewed who was willing to settle where they were. There was a unanimous draw from each of them to continue ahead, as tough as it may be or become. That was the beauty of what I came to talk about. The struggle of knowing there are nothing but obstacles in your way but feeling the drive to reach further and do better all the same.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of conducting my research while completing this project, there were multiple points that I believe carried extreme importance. To start, the influence of education in relation to working is one of the utmost importance. This isn't limited to education through school though. The reality is that schools aren't going to teach you about work and what it means to be working. Even to take it a step deeper, school isn't going to teach you anything close to what real life is. The learning has to come from forces independent of the school systems. Something mundane as our ideas of work and our relationship to working are hardly transparent, therefore we owe to one another to explain what the truth is. Secondly, the understanding of one's work identity is vital in the seeking, maintenance of, and response to working as one makes their way through life. Understanding who you are and understanding what works for you is essential in making your way. Admittedly though, this isn't an easy journey and unfortunately the sad truth is that not everyone will be given the same chances or choices, nor will they share many of the same views about the way things are. It's no secret that the world and the people in it are made to be consistently divided more than they are not. There isn't a clear cut solution to the problems of the many but, through sharing with one another like this, maybe a bridging of gaps could occur and make sense of our chaotic order. Ideally, through the exploration of the real people and their real histories, moments where we're able to see the gritty underbelly that doesn't make contact with the masses we can attempt to put things in place. We can realize that we're more alike than we are different. The beauty of having subjects that were so different is that when taking a step back to look at the bigger picture, there were more similarities than I anticipated. All interviewees having such different backgrounds and growing ups, might leave

one to assume the narratives would be drastically different. As it can be seen though, the mindsets didn't stray too far away from one another. Each of the interviewees understood the nature of their circumstance and chose to keep going, regardless. Across the board it was understood that there isn't an easy way out. There were no shortcuts or skips they could take. No one ever said there would be though.

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