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"Not Scholarship Girls: Recomposing the Lives  
of Adult Working-Class Women Through Literacy Narratives"

by

Eileen Manning Ferretti

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1998

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Introduction

This dissertation examines the classroom experience of a group of paraprofessional women (or paras as they are known at their job sites) who were students in my freshman writing class at Kingsborough Community College in the fall of 1992<sup>1</sup> as they made a transition from vocational skills-based classes to the liberal arts curriculum. Through the lens of the paras' semester-long classroom narratives and my teaching journal, I will offer an account of our negotiations and dialogues as these adult women students contemplate the leap from vocational training to the liberal arts track of the college. These written records also illuminate the resistance I encountered in my attempts to reposition the paras from workers who attend college for narrow technical knowledge (and Board of Education pay raises) to student intellectuals who aspire to a liberal arts degree. At the same time, in this classroom of adult women who work for a living, I came face to face with the politics of academic culture and its complicity in a tracking system that confines so many working-class and non-traditional students, like the paras, to the margins of the

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<sup>1</sup>These thirty women are typical (in terms of age, income, race, ethnicity, etc.) of a larger constituency of 150 paras I taught in freshman composition and basic writing at Kingsborough over ten consecutive semesters from 1992-1997.

university.

In this dissertation, I will consider the effectiveness of critical pedagogy which offers an alternative model to the uncritical curriculum and depressed aspirations learned by these women in their vocational courses. Focusing on the ongoing struggle of resistance and accommodation between myself and my students, this "pedagogy narrative" will closely examine my classroom interactions with them throughout the semester which suggest that class, gender, age, occupation, and education construct these women as *silent facilitators of other people's lives* in the home, the school workplace, and on the college campus. In developing this thesis, I will closely read their narratives to theorize their conflicted encounter with campus life. Correlative with my thesis on *silent facilitators* is a secondary thesis on the need for expansion of the literacy narrative genre now emergent in composition and rhetoric. Literacy narratives offer accounts of assimilation into academic culture from the perspective of working-class academics. Typically focused on the dissonance between the writer's home and school cultures, these impressive stories have been effectively used by Richard Rodriguez, Keith Gilyard, Mike Rose, Linda Brodkey, Lorene Cary, and others to illuminate the conflicts encountered by students from

working-class backgrounds. Because they were written from the perspective of "Scholarship Boys and Girls,"<sup>2</sup> who came to college young, unmarried, and childless, the literacy narratives lack the perspective of adult women encountering campus culture later in life. In brief, literacy narratives do not account for age and family responsibilities which impact upon the intellectual growth and professional development of adult women who return to school while working and raising families. The paras' stories can help to remedy this imbalance.

Thus, the dual goal I have in mind for this dissertation is one that fosters inclusiveness in literacy narratives and questions the skills-based pedagogy offered to these adult women students. As a group, the paras lend themselves to this dual thesis for several reasons. First, they are an inviting group to study because they are enrolled in special "para" sections at the college and they work at similar job sites. These two factors make them a more homogenous group than other female working-class students I have taught who are employed in a number of

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<sup>2</sup>In his seminal cultural studies text *The Uses of Literacy*, (1957), Richard Hoggart devoted a chapter to "The Uprooted and Anxious Scholarship Boy" of England. The term "Scholarship Boy" has been used in extant literacy narratives to identify working-class students who undergo a process of cultural separation from their working-class origins as they assimilate into academic culture.

different fields. Their degree of homogeneity invites theorizing about their academic conflicts. Second, the Board of Education offers them tuition remission and salary increments in exchange for college attendance. Therefore, although they encounter many of the same obstacles as their counterparts in other programs, the social and economic incentives make them less likely to drop out of school during a long-term study. Finally, they write a lot in my classes, producing voluminous texts which can be compared to literacy narratives published by various academics in the field.

### Methodology

The primary research for this dissertation was conducted in my writing class at Kingsborough Community College during the fall 1992 semester. Information on a total of thirty paraprofessional women was obtained by self-reporting in their class-assigned literacy narratives on family, work, and student life, where each woman reported her age, her racial, cultural, and ethnic background, and wrote about her family, her job, and her previous educational experiences.

While the women ranged in age from twenty-eight to

sixty-four, most were in their thirties or forties, with the median age being forty-one. All of the women had at least one child and nineteen were married. Of the eleven non-married women, six were single mothers and five were divorced parents. Fifteen identified themselves as white. Of those, approximately half said they were ethnically mixed (the most common being Italian/Irish and Italian/Jewish). Of the remaining fifteen six identified themselves as Hispanic, three said they were African-Americans, two claimed Asian origin, and four said they were first generation immigrants -- one from Haiti, one from Guyana, and two from Russia.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, as research sources, the womens' narratives are primary materials collected in two forms: autobiographical accounts of family, work, and student life and reflections on readings about gender, race, and class.<sup>4</sup> Each student wrote a minimum of six autobiographical narratives and six narrative reflections on alternate weeks

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<sup>3</sup>Although the demographics of this group are largely representative of subsequent sections of freshman composition, there were many more African-Americans, Haitians, and Hispanic women in my basic writing classes and seventy-five percent of the minority women in my freshman writing classes had previously taken at least one basic writing class. Thus, while age and gender complicate the narratives of these students, race and ethnic background complicate class and gender. More women of color and members of other minority groups found it harder to assimilate into academic literacy than did white ethnic women.

<sup>4</sup>Themes chosen by the women in the process of co-developing the course with me which I will discuss in detail in Chapter One.

throughout the semester. The texts were composed in the form of classroom journal entries; they varied in length from a few paragraphs to a few pages [each], and comprised approximately one-third of the students' writing in the course. The narratives from all thirty paras were photocopied, and originals returned to them. From this material, I selected excerpts<sup>5</sup> from the autobiographical accounts, narrative reflections, and/or classroom commentary<sup>6</sup> of twenty women<sup>7</sup> to illustrate how some individual students addressed various themes and informed classroom dialogue. In selecting these excerpts from student writing, I chose two types of autobiographical narratives: those I saw reflecting shared experiences, beliefs, or practices which could be generalized to the larger group, and those I saw offering critical insight into experiences that only some paras encountered, which very few of them could critically examine

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<sup>5</sup>The dual criteria in my selection of excerpts were to highlight texts that reflected some typical journal entries from a variety of ethnic and racial groups and age cohorts among the students and to illustrate the kinds of responses (or follow-up narratives) these selected texts elicited from other women.

<sup>6</sup>All classroom commentary cited in this dissertation was obtained from my teaching journal (some of which was written spontaneously in class and some of which was recorded on audio cassettes and later transcribed).

<sup>7</sup>The inclusion of writing by approximately two-thirds of the students in this dissertation not only represents my goal to raise the profile of the paras as writers of their own stories, but also illustrates how the narratives of one writer elicited a variety of responses from other writers and how this intertextuality informed classroom dialogue.

and articulate in writing. My selection process thus sought the typical and atypical in the womens' narratives. Further, from their responses to outside readings on gender, class, and race issues I selected diverse opinions offered by women from different age cohorts, races, ethnic backgrounds, and marital statuses so as to represent the diversity in this apparently homogenous group. In the order of their appearance in this dissertation, the twenty women whose texts I highlight are: Cassandra,<sup>8</sup> a thirty-one-year-old African-American mother of six; Janice, a thirty-six-year-old Jewish-American mother of three; Angelica, a forty-two-year-old divorced Hispanic mother of four; Joan, a thirty-four-year-old Italian-American mother of three; Lin, a thirty-year-old Asian-American mother of three; Laura, a fifty-year-old divorced mother of three adult sons; Stephanie, a thirty-eight-year-old Italian-American mother of four; Monique, a forty-two-year-old single Haitian mother of five; Valerie, a forty-six-year-old Italian-American mother of two; Gloria, a thirty-eight-year-old African-American mother of five; Svetlana, a forty-eight-year-old divorced Russian immigrant and mother of three; Maria, a

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<sup>8</sup>All of the women gave me permission to use their classroom commentary and their narratives in this dissertation. The names attached to particular excerpts are pseudonyms that each student selected for herself. With the exceptions of standardizing spelling and punctuation and editing out repetitions (indicated by ellipses) I did not alter their verbal or written comments.

thirty-one-year-old Hispanic mother of two; Michelina, a thirty-nine-year-old Hispanic mother of four; Carol, a fifty-four-year-old mother of two adult daughters; Margaret, a fifty-two-year-old mother of one and grandmother of three; Monica, a forty-nine-year-old African-American mother of two and grandmother of six; Diane, a thirty-four-year-old mother of three; Rebecca, a fifty-two-year-old mother of three; Karen, a twenty-eight-year-old mother of three; and Julia, a sixty-four-year-old mother of one adult son and grandmother of two.

In addition, the final chapter of this dissertation examines the semester-long narratives of three women (Stephanie, Angelica, and Cassandra). I selected these particular women for two reasons: first, they represent the diversity of racial/ethnic background and economic/marital status among the students, and second, their journals illuminate the three most common approaches to narrative writing I observed among the students. Specifically, some women, like Stephanie, emerged as "initiators" who used their narratives to explore a number of self-generated themes. Others, like Angelica, became "respondents," who typically wrote reflections (or follow-up narratives) that offered new perspectives on topics already under discussion. Still others, like Cassandra, developed into "thematic

writers," or those who consistently focused their narratives on a single identity or role conflict in their everyday lives.

In theorizing the paras' difficult encounter with the liberal arts curriculum, I will also offer a number of excerpts from my teaching journal where I recorded my impressions and pedagogical choices. Through a close reading of selections from this journal, I will explain how I came to theorize the typical and atypical experiences which characterize this group of women in their homogenous and diverse conditions.

Taking the Gendered/Classed Route on Campus  
Adult Women Moving Sideways on the Vocational Track

Paraprofessionals are typically female workers employed by the New York City Board of Education to assist teachers in the classrooms, as well as to provide supervision of children in the school cafeteria, on school buses, and in the playgrounds. In the case of children with "special needs," they act as custodial guardians, communication facilitators for autistic children, teacher/parent liaisons for bi-lingual children, etc. These adult women come to Kingsborough not to earn a full college degree, but merely to obtain "Board Certification" in their job title which requires a high school diploma or equivalent plus six

college credits in education within two years of employment. The women, themselves, told me that most paras remain in college beyond six credits solely to accumulate various electives in education and related fields for which they receive tuition waivers<sup>9</sup> and regular salary increments.<sup>10</sup>

After their long-term odyssey with career-based classes, only some of the paras finally enter the liberal arts track of the college and become my students in freshman composition or basic writing. Thus, at the end of several years of *slightly* higher education (in exchange for pay raises), the paras find themselves still at the starting gate (in entry level college composition). In addition, their pay raises abruptly terminate after they complete sixty credits,<sup>11</sup> leaving the paras sliding sideways through college and downhill through their paychecks.

Moreover, once they enter the liberal arts track of the college, their tuition is no longer automatically remitted by the Board of Education; to receive re-imburement for

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<sup>9</sup>The Board of Education remits tuition payments for up to six credits per semester for paras who major in education.

<sup>10</sup>In 1992, their full-time job with the Board of Education offered an annual salary of \$11,000 (plus health benefits and pension plan), increasing to \$16,000 annually after sixty credits. Between 1992 and 1997, the starting salary increased to \$15,000 and \$21,000 after sixty credits.

<sup>11</sup>After 90 credits, paras may apply for a change of job title from Education Associate to Auxiliary Trainer at a slightly higher salary (and more college money), but these positions are limited to one or two per school site and vacancies are rare.

tuition dollars spent on liberal arts credits, they must prove that they do not qualify for any other sources of financial aid. This process is time-consuming and places an additional financial burden on their families at a time when they are also struggling with more rigorous academic requirements.<sup>12</sup>

When I first met them in freshman writing in 1992, I was astounded to learn that the paras had been in college as long as I had -- the only difference being that my eight years earned me a B.A. and an M.A. in English, while their eight years were spent in piecemeal vocational courses qualifying them for Board of Education pay raises. From their comments about their home, work, and campus lives, I inferred that these women share some educational, occupational, and socio-economic conditions which characterize them as "working-class." For example, in terms of typical working-class markers, they are the first generation of their families to gain access to higher education. No university habits from privileged corners of academe have been passed down to them by prior family members. Thus, on campus, they are on unfamiliar cultural

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<sup>12</sup>This is a financial burden because automatic tuition remission requires no "out of pocket" expense beyond the cost of books and supplies, while tuition re-imbusement requires an initial outlay of approximately eight hundred dollars (for six credits), plus a student activity fee which many paras find difficult to manage (especially in the fall semester when their children are also returning to school and need new clothing and school supplies):

ground outside their own class roots. Further, from a typically working-class position in society, they hold full-time jobs while being commuter students at a low-budget urban campus with over-crowded classes and a vocationalized curriculum -- a condition which separates their campus experience from those of the "Scholarship Boys and Girls" who gained access to the upper-class luxury of living on handsome, residential campuses. The orientation to vocational careerism in their program also marks them as working-class -- students for whom work discipline/preparation is the key value, not critical knowledge. In college they are being trained and disciplined to remain at the lower end of the job and political structures.<sup>13</sup>

Occupationally, at their school job sites, the paras are positioned at the bottom of the civil service hierarchy. As the cheap labor of the New York City school system, they follow the orders of those above them. Their lack of authority on the job is another working-class marker. They execute process conceived by the professional supervisors in their workplace. They do not generally take part in the planning that guides school policy-making. Typically

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<sup>13</sup>The expectation that most will remain subordinate workers is made clear by their delayed access to the liberal arts curriculum (on average, eight years) and confirmed by the low rates of graduation -- only about a third complete an associate degree and only about ten percent earn a B.A. despite the fact that approximately eighty-percent remain in college for a decade or more.

working-class in their lack of authority on the job, they have little control over their working environment, work schedule, or college curriculum, and are subject to frequent evaluations of job performance by supervisors. Lacking authority and choice, as the objects of supervisory control and discipline, the paras are clearly at the bottom of the socio-economic wage hierarchy. Further, in addition to drawing low wages, they typically own little household wealth, another sign of working-class identity. Without accumulated wealth in the form of property or stock portfolios, they have little choice but to keep working for a living, going from paycheck to paycheck as they sell their labor everyday to make ends meet, which further confirms their working-class situation in the economy. Most of the paras' families are among the sixty-five percent of all American families who earn less than \$50,000 per year, and many are among the fifty-percent who earn less than \$37,000 per year.<sup>14</sup>

Common Bonds:  
A Working-Class Teacher Among Working-Class Women

To begin, I should say that my life story is close to

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<sup>14</sup>Statistical Abstract of the U.S. Bureau of Census, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Wash. D.C. (1996) charts 721 & 722 (468).

theirs. Before college, I was a lunch-mother at the Catholic elementary school my children attended in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Married to a New York City sanitation worker,<sup>15</sup> like the paras, I was typically working-class in my relation to the social, economic, occupational, and educational structure. Lunch-mothering provided a local setting and work schedule that coincided with my mothering responsibilities. At the same time, working in the lunchroom taught me what it means to be a low-wage subordinate worker in a school setting because lunch-mother was a position of "fragile authority." In reality, I was an illusion, a "pseudo-mom," a "make-believe institutional mother" who had no real power. But, my role required that I fill in for real authority (regular teachers) during lunch hour, so I was often left to supervise the children without being supervised myself. Watching the kids required some spontaneous decision-making on my part -- but mostly, common sense, parental intuition, and peace-keeping skills. At the same time, this hour of standing in for regular teachers created a potential breach in the power-hierarchy between the "credentialed" professionals who had real

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<sup>15</sup>My husband, John, who was employed by the N.Y.C. Dept. of Sanitation for twenty years, attended evening classes at Brooklyn College where he earned a B.A. in sociology. Now retired, he has since earned an M.A. and is currently employed as a counselor at The City University of New York Office of Admission Services.

authority to make decisions and the "uncredentialed" people like me who did not. Some mothers helped in the classroom and had the benefit of an official authority figure (the teacher) close at hand to validate their decisions, much like dad (and the belt)<sup>16</sup> back up mommy's threats in the family at home. But in the lunchroom, I was left to fight my own battles with the children without real authority, under the thumb of the dreaded Sister Superior who headed the school and who questioned my decisions at some awkward moments. As a "Sister Inferior," my access to the shared assumptions and language practices of the professional class was limited. So, on those frequent occasions when my spontaneous decisions were questioned, I related to the Sister Superior in two ways: submissive silence or rapid-fire rationalizations. Being silent made me feel suppressed rage while spontaneously justifying my behavior to the Sister Superior forced me to engage in a stressful, infantilizing, and frustrating verbal performance.

When I look back on this chapter in my life, one particular day always comes to mind. We were in the midst of our monthly pizza sale, a very popular meal for the kids, so the lunchroom was over-crowded with children who usually

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<sup>16</sup>The belt (or strap) was used regularly by previous generations to enforce discipline. However, today, its presence in the household is understood in patriarchal working-class culture as a concrete symbol of paternal authority. .

went home to eat. I noticed that one fourth-grade boy was busy constructing a "home-made-bomb" -- an orange wrapped up in pieces of aluminum foil that were scattered about his lunch table. I caught him just as he was ready to throw the bomb at a group of first-graders -- to cover them with citrus splatter. So I disarmed the little menace and placed him and his uneaten pizza at a table in the rear of the lunchroom. As luck would have it, his mother was there (selling pizza) and she threw a "power-bomb" at me by reporting the incident to the dreaded Sister Superior who was right on the scene eyeballing me for an explanation. I stood there in the midst of spilled soda, empty cardboard boxes, and screaming children trying to defend my unauthorized decision to isolate the little bomber. My rage exploded in words that pizza day, and I did such a good job at talking non-stop that Sister finally said in exasperation (hoping to shut me up), "*Mrs. Ferretti, Do You Have A Degree?*" I said, "*No, I Have Children.*"

Looking back on my eight years as a lunchmother, I know that the most important lesson I learned in the Catholic cafeteria was that a college degree was "golden." It was a passport to respect, decision-making status, and some real authority. The second lesson I learned (several years later in the process of earning an advanced degree) was what the

type of education I received in my working-class community of Bensonhurst was actually constructed to prepare me for the position of lunch-mother. Although I graduated from Catholic elementary school at the top of my eighth-grade class, I was offered no option by the Diocese of Brooklyn but to attend an all-girls high school where I received mostly secretarial training from poorly educated nuns and female lay teachers.<sup>17</sup> Like Mike Rose, who recounted his erroneous placement on the vocational track in *Lives on the Boundary*, "I did what I had to do to get by in school and I did it with half a mind -- the intellectual equivalent of playing with your food" (28). But, unlike Rose, I was not rescued from the mundane tasks of vocational training; instead, my secondary education prepared me to remain in the working-class.

As a lunch-mother who yearned for the golden passport of a college degree, I had no idea that my working-class background and unequal educational opportunities had developed me to become a subordinate worker. I only knew that my prior education left me feeling bored, frustrated, and inadequate. Being a lunch-mother fit right in to my depressant education because school had already declared me

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<sup>17</sup>By contrast, the top ranked boys went on to elite academic programs run by the diocese exclusively for males. Thus, inequality was "gendered" as well as "classed" in my working-class community of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.

"too dumb for college."<sup>18</sup> Even though I had nagging intellectual desires, the lunchroom re-enforced the notion that my aspirations for higher learning were only pipe dreams. At the same time, as a subordinate worker in a school setting, I was in daily contact with school professionals where I could see with my adult eyes the sleazy process of sorting and labeling children as "smart" or "slow." My growing awareness of this tracking process led to my own resistance to subordination and ended in my decision to leave the land of the dreaded Sister Superior, pizza sales, and juvenile bombers and go to Brooklyn College. At Brooklyn, a four-year liberal arts campus, I gained access to the elite track of higher education, one meant for the privileged few, not the masses.<sup>19</sup> Released from the lunchroom, my new role as a student studying Western Civilization encouraged me to voice opinions, make decisions, negotiate points of difference, and imagine possibilities, rather than to live with low expectations "waiting to be told what to do and what things mean" (18), as Ira Shor wrote in *Empowering Education*. And I discovered

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<sup>18</sup>Specifically, confinement to an all-female vocational high school declared me (at age thirteen) "too dumb for college" because I was denied access to college-prep courses.

<sup>19</sup>At Brooklyn, I gained access to The Honors Academy, a special two-year scholarship program sponsored by The Ford Foundation which offers academic enrichment for gifted students pursuing careers in academe.

I might not be "too dumb for college."

Seeing in Two Directions:  
Face to Face With My Former Self

Today, I'm employed as a graduate teaching fellow while I complete a doctorate at The City University of New York (CUNY) -- but, lunch-mothering still feels too close for comfort. The paraprofessional women I teach also come to higher education as the products of working-class schooling, and like me, they know exactly what it means to occupy subordinate positions in a school setting where they have limited access to the assumptions and language practices of the professional class. Our shared history has prompted me to observe in them similar rhetorical conflicts to those I experienced in relation to the Sister Superior. At times in my writing classes these substantial women are easily silenced by just a few words from me the "teacher authority." Yet there are moments when both their verbal and written responses erupt in a non-stop stream of words as if they felt the need to articulate everything they have ever learned or felt or thought before their brief time to speak in class runs out. Like myself in the lunchroom, they lack confidence in their rhetorical authority while also lacking command of academic discourse. But, unlike me,

these women have remained in positions of deep subordination in the workplace. While I am partially professionalized as a doctoral student and as a writing teacher with some cultural and institutional authority, their lives require a continual negotiation between being a worker and being a college student -- behavior and language practices which are more often than not at odds with each other.

Knowing their struggle from the inside, I see one of my primary roles in the classroom as providing a mediation between the paras' everyday language and the academy's special uses of discourse. To succeed in college and in professional life requires students to internalize the linguistic practices of the academy. But using academic language requires a confidence in your social authority and a competence in discourse that working-class students are prevented from developing. For example, in a moving essay entitled "The Mighty Wedge of Class," J. Todd Erkel discusses the dissonance between the middle-class packaging he gained at the university and the working-class core he brought from home, a dissonance I and the women I teach must confront to gain citizenship<sup>20</sup> in higher education. Erkel points out:

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<sup>20</sup>A great deal of discussion about upward mobility of working-class students centers on "access" to higher education as a primary goal. However, "access" does not lead to "equity" unless citizenship (the right to feel one belongs there) is achieved.

Embracing the promise of higher education requires working-class students to develop an inner sense of themselves that is radically different from that of their parents, siblings, and friends, to betray their allegiance to the only source of support and identity they have ever known. (103)

The fear of losing touch with the familiar that Erkel discusses engenders resistance in these adult women students to academic work. For the most part, they are socially constructed in the workplace as the silent facilitators of the goals and intentions of the professionals who supervise them. On campus, they are only part time-students and many have been labeled "deficient" in language skills. They live in constant dread of coming face to face with the university gate-keepers (thereby losing their pay increments) and they have few, if any role models in their "paras only" classes. It is an atmosphere where everyone knows everyone and no one wants to risk becoming the object of ridicule or envy among their peers by standing out or standing above. Therefore, my attempts to cultivate their verbal and intellectual capacities and to move my students beyond the parameters of their immediate surroundings are often met with impatience, indifference, or downright hostility. If the first sub-text

of their cultural conflict is their fear of losing touch with the familiar, then the second is their attitude that says to me, "I have a life outside the composition class, so keep it simple." Because their vocational curriculum is developed for full-time workers, most of whom are expected to remain at their present jobs, the difference between the expectations of their Board of Ed. program and the official degree requirements of the college is substantial. Thus, although these liberal arts paras represent the "scholastic survivors" in a group where most don't get that far, they are not on a fast track to academic learning, and their delayed entry into liberal arts presents a range of conflicts for women already encumbered by full-time jobs and family responsibilities.

Conflicting Expectations:  
Encountering Critical Pedagogy

Besides their jobs and families interfering with their academic lives, I have to say that my critical pedagogy (drawn from the work of Paulo Freire and Ira Shor)<sup>21</sup> looks

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<sup>21</sup>In *Empowering Education*, Ira Shor defines critical pedagogy as a "democratic curriculum examining all subjects and learning processes with systematic depth, to connect student individuality to larger historical and social issues, to encourage students to examine how their experience relates to academic knowledge, to power, and to inequality in society, and to approach received wisdom and the status quo with questions" (16-17). Also see Banks (1991), Brookfield (1987), Dewey (1966), McLaren (1989), and Shor (1996;87),

to them like a writing class from Mars -- basically, a Star-Trek departure from the fill-in-the-blank education they have gotten. As Carlene, an African-American student in one of my basic writing classes said, "In this class, you can't check your answers. No one seems to have the right answers, the same answers, or even the same questions." Carlene's need for definitive answers conflicted with my pedagogy of questions, but this did not surprise me because the women's sturdy desire for "the facts" had been permanently stamped in my memory on my first teaching day at Kingsborough. I had barely uttered my name before a designated spokesperson announced that the women in the room already knew all about me (where I lived, attended school, had previously taught). Even my date of birth was announced by a second para who had a snooping friend in personnel. As soon as my life facts were announced, a third para said, "As you can see, we know all about you. So hand out the syllabus and let's go home." The students I had hoped to empower with a critical pedagogy were already walking all over me and were eager to walk out the door. It's fair to say they knew how to break me in right.

One of the first passages from the long teaching journal I wrote that night (September 7th) illuminates my sense of uncertainty and conflict:

...The atmosphere in this class really disturbs me. I think it's because the students are already a group and I'm an outsider. I'm used to having an instructor's advantage, I guess, that is, knowing more about them than they do about me and being in charge of introducing myself and encouraging them to get to know each other. These women already know each other too well and their stories about their lives at home, at work, and on campus are so depressing. But, the information they shared in class also tells me something essential about them and about my role as their instructor: I will not be at the head of this class or even a presence in their classroom unless I can somehow help them to make a stronger connection to higher education, to see it as something more than a means to increase their income. I'm not sure how I can even begin to do that in a single semester. How will these women with so many roles and so little time reposition themselves from workers who come to college for pay raises to full-fledged college students?

In reading my students' journals<sup>22</sup> that same night, I

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<sup>22</sup>Each student submitted a list of attributes (or composite sketch) and a brief autobiographical narrative on the first day of class which I will discuss in Chapter One..

discovered a point of entry into their lives that might help them to reflect on their multiple roles and on their choice to enter the liberal arts track of higher education. Their self-descriptions, although brief and undeveloped, illustrated a particular understanding of higher education (as skills-based) and illuminated the priorities they had already internalized regarding their multiple roles.

Thus, the womens' daily experiences at home, at work, and on the college campus became the thematic center of my composition class, as my critical teaching approach invited them to compose literacy narratives in which they would reflect on their own academic development. The literacy narrative genre evolving from the stories of "Scholarship Boys and Girls" shows that coming to college young, unmarried, and childless enabled them to make a faster climb out of their working-class roots than is available to, or possible for, older adults like the paras whose family responsibilities keep them rooted in their home cultures despite their long-term exposure to campus life. In this way, "class" is gendered as well as age-related in its impact on the upward mobility of these working-class women.

Specifically, the literacy narratives I will discuss in this dissertation (autobiographical journals on family, work, and student life and narrative responses to readings

on gender, race, and class) emerged from themes selected by the students in the process of co-developing the course with me.<sup>23</sup> As Joseph Harris points out:

Our goals as teachers should be to offer [students] the chance to reflect critically on those discourses -- of home, school, work, and media, and the like -- to which they already belong. (19)<sup>24</sup>

The production of these texts took place without reference to model narratives, as the womens' own memories and literate histories provided the primary reading material for the class. That is, I did not include published literacy narratives as readers for the paras,<sup>25</sup> but co-developed with them a series of readings on themes they selected so as to keep the focus of the course on their interests and their writing. Constructed in their own idioms and situated in the themes and conditions of para life, these narratives speak

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<sup>23</sup>I will discuss the process of co-developing the course in Chapter One.

<sup>24</sup>This approach differs from the assimilation model endorsed by Bartholomae, Bizzell, and Rose in that students are not mimicking or approximating academic language and responding to academic themes, but using their own idioms to reflect on themes that arise from their everyday lives.

<sup>25</sup>For an example of how published literacy narratives are integrated into a freshman writing class, see Mary Soliday's "Translating Self and Difference Through Literacy Narratives," *College English* 56.3(1994):511-523.

for a group whose experience with higher education is significantly different from that of other working-class students.

Essentially, then, the paras' narratives represent a localized account within a general working-class experience. Their local process of separation from their roots and assimilation into academic culture is delayed by their domestic lives, their jobs, and then again by a program that postpones their entry into the official liberal arts curriculum by keeping them for a long time in vocational classes. Thus, the para literacy narratives offer one distinct pattern of cultural separation and assimilation for working-class women students which illustrates both the benefits and the cost of a belated and prolonged period of college attendance. In highlighting these texts, my goal is twofold: First, to raise the profile of some average adult working students whose progress from domestic life and school employment to higher education is not triumphant (or documented), unlike the stories already published by some notable "Scholarship Boys and Girls;" and second, to offer a consideration of critical pedagogy as a means to invite these adult working women to explore their cultural conflicts, question their subordinate social construction, and transform their marginal encounters with campus life.

## Chapter One

### Class Matters: Codeveloping a Critical Curriculum

#### Introduction

This chapter closely examines the classroom activities, negotiations, and dialogues which took place during first month of my freshman writing class at Kingsborough during the fall 1992 semester. These nine (two-hour) class sessions (from Monday, September 9th, through Wednesday, October 9th), introduced the women to my pedagogy which centers on a critical inquiry into *their* lives, issues, and concerns. From the start, I was eager to learn about their everyday themes and to use their observations and comments as material for critical discussion and reflective inquiry. With regard to method, I proceeded by drawing material for this inquiry from the students' verbal and written comments on their home, work, and school experiences. That is, what the students said and wrote about their own lives during the first and subsequent classes became the texts to be read, and how members of the class responded to each other's stories provided the first means through which to interpret these texts.

Given the common conditions of our domestic experience, our shared histories as subordinate workers in a school setting, and our mutual decision to return to school as adults, I hoped that my writing class would offer the paras a chance to reflect critically on their role conflicts so as to help them mediate between the limited vocational curriculum of their immediate past and the liberal arts classes immediately ahead. To this end, I had carefully planned a course that would involve the women in all aspects of developing the curriculum.

Thus, on the first day of class (Monday, September 9th), I arrived at Room D-110 in the West Academic Cluster with a specific (two-hour) lesson plan in mind. During the first hour, I wanted to share some pertinent details about my background and educational history and invite each woman to compose an introduction which would include similar information about herself. I planned to use the second class hour to initiate a dialogue with the students about their interests (in terms of reading material and themes for writing). Given this agenda for the first class, I had no syllabus, no list of required readings or writing assignments, and no intention to dismiss the class early.

Coming through the door of the classroom, I was greeted by a small delegation of three middle-aged women who looked

just like me (when I'm not in my "academic uniform"). Sporting colorful sweatshirts with pithy sayings and stretch pants tucked into tube-socks and Reeboks, these veterans of the community college were completely at ease with their surroundings -- even if I was not. "Are you Eileen Ferretti?" they asked. I said, "Yes, I am." The room filled up quickly with some thirty women (a few of whom could not find seats and sat on the floor at the back of the room). The designated spokespersons who greeted me at the door (but did not give their names) let me know right away that there was no need to introduce myself because all the women in the room already knew all about me. Cassandra, a thirty-one-year-old African-American mother of six was the first to introduce herself, and requested a copy of the course syllabus. I asked Cassandra to take her seat and suggested that the first order of business should be finding desks for the students who were sitting on the floor. These women, who were busy talking among themselves, said they didn't need desks because it was the first day of class and they expected to be in the room only a short time -- just long enough to get a syllabus and a list of assignments.

After the first class hour, which the women spent "explaining para life" to me, Cassandra got tired of sitting on the floor and moved a number of empty desks into the

room. I used this interruption to suggest that we take a five-minute break and then go on to our negotiation of the course requirements. Immediately, several hands were raised, and Janice, a thirty-six-year-old other of three, came up to my desk and spoke softly to me, suggesting that I dismiss the class early, go home and write an official (teacher-generated) syllabus and a detailed list of the written assignments. My counter-suggestion (announced aloud to the class) was that we stay for the remaining class hour to codevelop a syllabus and discuss the writing assignments. This idea was met with suspicion, even outright protest, as the other women unanimously endorsed Janice's idea about a teacher-generated syllabus and an early dismissal.

Angelica, a forty-two-year-old divorced Hispanic mother of four explained the group's perspective explaining that the women in the class had been college students for a long time and that they saw no reason to co-develop a syllabus with a teacher. "We know you mean well," she said, "but we really prefer to maintain the structure of our previous college classes -- where required texts and written assignments were clearly outlined in black and white." (I would later learn that these documents represented a starting point from which the group typically initiates a "downward negotiation" of the work load). At this first class session, however, the

women told me that a detailed syllabus and semester-long assignment sheets are essential to their survival in college because they provide a certain measure of predictability and structure which they believe allows them to do their school work while raising families and working full-time.

### Lessons on Para Culture

Once I made it clear that I was prepared to stay for the second hour anyway (to discuss the conflict between my plans for the course and my students' expectations), the women settled down to the business of arguing their case for maintaining the "status quo." The first to speak was Janice, who explained the womens' perceived need for what she called "a specific map of the course requirements":

Although we paras are in freshman composition, we are not typical college freshmen.<sup>1</sup> We are wives, mothers, and full-time workers who chose to enter liberal arts courses after successful completion of a specialized

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<sup>1</sup>This "difference" became increasingly apparent to me as the womens' narrative productions evolved. Although they had little access to habits of critical inquiry or to the language practices of the academy, the paras had acquired a great deal of *information* from their vocational courses. Their familiarity with sociological, psychological, and educational *terms* (and their curiosity about how to apply this knowledge to their everyday lives) provided a starting point from which to synthesize their observations and commentary into a focused discussion on the questions and issues they raised in class.

curriculum. Our lives demand that we plan our school work in advance so that college attendance fits into the larger picture.

This "larger picture" was further described by Angelica, a forty-two-year-old divorced Hispanic mother of four, as commitments to other roles which placed limits on the women's time and energy. She said, "Given such hectic schedules, planning ahead for school assignments is a practical necessity." In addition, Joan, a thirty-four-year-old Italian-American mother of three, pointed out that the sequential structure of the para program left the women no option but to take three liberal arts courses -- two requirements in composition, plus one required elective in literature, history, or philosophy -- at the end of the vocational sequence (if they wanted an associate degree). "So," Joan said, "we don't expect the *rules* of college to change at this late date." Cassandra agreed with Joan and further explained the paras' perspective on this dilemma:

The paras in this class want more out of college than a bigger paycheck. After spending so much time here, we want an associate degree from this school. The only thing standing between us and that degree is three

liberal arts classes. We don't want or need any changes in our program! We just want you to be reasonable and give us a manageable workload outlined in a semester-long syllabus and an instruction sheet for each written assignment.

This explanation indicates how the paras viewed my freshman writing class as "doing time" on the liberal arts track (in exchange for a degree) in much the same way as they had "done time" on the vocational track (in exchange for pay raises). Acquisition of intellectual capital was not meaningful to them, as they preferred to accumulate more immediate, concrete rewards from the system (specific credentials). Cassandra's comment also reveals the paras' habituation into the existing orthodoxies of the standard school curriculum where official textbooks and syllabi are dispensed by the teacher. Most of the women agreed with Cassandra, some saying, "It's your job to give us the work, and it's our job to do it."

Standing alone in front of these women for the first time on that September day, I was in awe of their agency in the classroom and intimidated by their collective upset of my "democratic" agenda for the first day of class. Intuitively, I turned to the blackboard, transcribed the

list of "facts"<sup>2</sup> the three delegates had announced about me and composed a narrative "self-portrait" beside it. I don't recall exactly what I wrote, but my story contained the phrase, "Eight years ago I was a lunchmother at my children's school." This new fact got immediate attention (I was one of them, it seemed) and generated a barrage of questions that I refused to answer until each student had compiled a similar list of facts about herself with an accompanying autobiographical narrative.

As the women read their lists, I used the blackboard to create a composite sketch of attributes for the thirty students (which included age range, marital status, number of children, race, ethnicity, number of years at their job sites, number of college credits earned so far, etc.). Although their individual fact sheets were substantial enough for me to draw out a number of attributes for this composite sketch of the class, the accompanying narratives were brief and unimaginative. As the women read them, I noticed that their multiple roles merged in their texts. Angelica captured the collective attitude quite succinctly when she wrote, "I became a para to supplement my family's income, and I came to college to supplement my para

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<sup>2</sup>I referred to this list of facts as a "composite sketch" and I was later surprised to hear the paras refer to their own lists of attributes as "composite sketches."

paycheck." Angelica's self-description indicates how the paras' work/study program encouraged them to accept a pre-ordained hierarchy among their multiple roles, one that subordinates education to family finances, limiting their orientation to reflect on the individual challenges and rewards that college attendance can present to each adult working women.

I collected their narratives<sup>3</sup> and sent them home that night -- without a syllabus or an assignment sheet. "What do you want us to bring to the next class?" they asked as they hurried out of the room, and I replied, "Just bring yourselves." Later that evening, I pored over their narratives looking for recurrent issues in para life (what Freire would call "generative themes"). To my surprise, "being silenced" emerged as the most striking image in these brief texts.<sup>4</sup> Expressed variously, and in a number of different contexts, the subordination of the paras' own needs and voices to the expectations of others summarized

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<sup>3</sup>With regard to method, this was the only day on which I collected all of their narratives. Beginning with the second class session, each woman read (all or part) of her own narrative in class and (with the students' permission) I taped part of each narrative session on audio-cassettes. Some students frequently submitted their narrative writings for my written commentary, while others did so only occasionally. However, the semester-long narrative writings of each para in the class were collected and photo-copied at the end of the semester; and the originals returned to the writer.

<sup>4</sup>And Freire has also emphasized the "culture of silence in the lives of the subordinate.

their individual self-portraits. For example, some mentioned husbands who wanted a second income without the inconvenience that a wife's absence from home inevitably creates. As Joan (whose narrative described her former occupation as a N.Y.C. bus driver) wrote, "Home life is easier when he doesn't see evidence (like dust on the coffee table) that I work." Others described their roles as workers and students as "a sore point" at home, something best left "outside the family." For example, Lin, a thirty-year-old Asian-American mother of three, married to an Hispanic high school teacher, cast her work and school identities as "aspects of myself best left at the door when I return to the family." Their feelings about being silenced at home and at their jobs surprised me because they were not silent in my class. Towards the end of my long teaching journal for that first day of class, I described my overall impressions of the womens' first narratives:

Despite the outward appearance of collective strength and unity, the paras present themselves individually as *silent facilitators of other people's lives*. Their narrative accounts reveal only who they are in relation to other people...not one woman mentioned personal goals or professional aspirations for the future."

Initially, I was surprised by the contradiction between the behavior the women exhibited in the classroom and the feelings they expressed in their writings -- that is, assertive, even "noisy" women writing about how they felt silenced by their subordinate positions. But, upon further reflection, I recognized this pattern as the same rhetorical conflict I experienced as a lunch-mother -- a silence resulting from a political condition of lacking authority (not necessarily a condition of not actually speaking).<sup>5</sup>

Because no one developed her role as a college student in these first narratives, I was eager to learn how the women characterized campus life. Thus, during the next class session on Wednesday, September 11th, I asked them to compose a narrative in which they described how they benefitted (intellectually, educationally, and professionally) from their college attendance. These accounts clearly illustrated how the paras had internalized working-class careerism, in a curriculum that required little participation or reflection and allowed them to accumulate specific types of college credits (and the attendant pay raises) if not quickly, at least regularly. Laura, a fifty-year-old divorced mother with three adult

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<sup>5</sup>The issue of "imposed silence" vs. what the women called "strategic silence" became a recurrent theme in their narratives which will be discussed in detail later.

sons wrote a typical response which described her experience with career-based courses as "fulfilling a mutual agreement" between herself and the Board of Education:

The para program gave me the opportunity to learn useful, concrete, and necessary skills I need to work with children. Working in an elementary school requires "hands on" skills and very specific kinds of knowledge about administrative rules and classroom activities. If I had spent the past eight years in liberal arts courses, I would have learned nothing about my job. By concentrating on education and related subjects, I got to increase my income and the Board of Ed. (which paid my tuition) got a better trained employee.

Given Laura's attitudes toward higher education, I followed up on her reading of the narrative with a question about why she chose to continue her studies in liberal arts classes which offer a different kind of knowledge and do not increase her income. She said, "It's only three courses, so it seemed foolish to leave college after all these years without some kind of official credential." In addition to accepting a skills-based model of higher education, Laura's

statement also reveals a working-class orientation to the practicality of "doing" instead of abstract philosophizing -- a perspective that nine out of ten women said they shared.<sup>6</sup> Thus, like most paras in the room, Laura assumed that higher education should mean learning how to do things in the workplace, and she saw that the system rewarded her financially for acquiring specific technical knowledge. At the same time, Laura said that she wanted official recognition from the university for her educational achievements -- that is, she wanted a diploma. Every woman in the room agreed that this concrete reward was the ultimate aim of their journey from the vocational to the liberal arts track of the college.<sup>7</sup>

However, because their unequal college program has developed them to remain at their present jobs, the liberal arts requirements of the college create a conflict for the paras. What becomes clear to them as they inch toward the long-awaited associate degree, is that the vocational courses that moved them ahead financially in the workplace do not have the same direct "exchange value" on the college

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<sup>6</sup>Only three women said they were unsure whether or not college should offer returning adults a curriculum of skills-based learning, exclusively.

<sup>7</sup>One of the most significant conflicts that emerged later in the paras' narratives was the dissonance between their support of career-based training and their desire for academic credentials -- specifically an associate degree in education which required liberal arts classes..

campus -- many are not "transferable" to the senior college. To encourage the women to critique this relationship between financial advancement at work and academic progress in college, I invited them to discuss some of the useful connections and the unresolved conflicts they encountered between work and school. In doing this, twenty-five out of the thirty women<sup>8</sup> admitted they became paraprofessionals because school employment offered them local job sites and a work schedule that fit their mothering responsibilities and their childrens' school calendar. In particular, of the twenty-five women who cited "work schedule" as the most significant benefit of their job, all but two also noted that being a para allowed them to be close to their children and the teachers who educate them and said they felt that their presence in the school system distinguished them as "concerned" parents, thus helping their kids get into the "right" (bright) classes. While the remaining five women who no longer had children in the school system said that they stayed on as paras because they believed that they had no other marketable skills, three also noted that working with children gave them a high level of job satisfaction, despite their subordinate roles and low pay. Because of their position as wage earners near the bottom of the economic

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<sup>8</sup>Five reported that they had become paraprofessionals after their children were grown.

system, though, the positive connections between school employment and higher education were consistently described in economic terms, that is, for nine out of ten women in the room, college attendance provided a means to supplement their income, keeping the family above the poverty line.

The "self-portraits" they wrote during the second class hour, however, revealed a conflict between their domestic lives and their enjoyment of work and school. For example, Stephanie, a thirty-eight-year-old Italian-American mother of four was the first to volunteer to read her narrative. She received a spontaneous round of applause when she referred to herself as a "multi-functional mom" and "a human extension cord on overload." Using this text to explore the conflicts among her domestic life, her job, and college attendance, Stephanie explained the "human extension cord metaphor as follows:

In order for my husband and my four kids to be "plugged in," I have to "unplug" the school children, the classroom teacher, and the professors at college.

This statement touched a nerve among the paras and generated a lively discussion on how they perceive themselves as "multi-functional moms" -- (what I call "silent facilitators

of other people's lives"). The women's overwhelming endorsement of this metaphor also highlights a significant difference between their perspectives of student life and those shared by the young, unmarried, and childless "Scholarship Boys and Girls." That is, unlike the published literacy narratives of working-class academics (where social class and its attendant barriers to upward mobility in education are cited as significant obstacles to their academic achievement), the women's accounts of home, work, and campus life made no mention of their gendered/classed<sup>9</sup> position in society. Specifically, no one cited lack of access to college prep courses in her prior schooling or lack of money to pursue a degree full-time as impediments to her academic success. In fact, a substantial number of women in the room said that they were proud of their positions as "multi-functional moms" (working and raising families while attending college) and a few admitted that they wished they had coined the metaphor because it described so precisely their own feelings about their multiple roles. In addition, Stephanie pointed out, "Feeling like an extension-cord on

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<sup>9</sup>I use a slash to link gendered and classed to emphasize the close interconnection between these two elements in constructing the paras' experiences and roles within their homes, their jobs, and the college. The gender patterns and ideologies that influence them are deeply marked by class, since gender expectations differ according to social class, just as their experiences of class are deeply marked by gender. I want to be clear that the two cannot be separated, that class and gender are implicated in each other.

overload, at times, is an inevitable consequence of being a 'multi-functional mom,' but the positive rewards far outweigh the negative aspects of juggling so many roles." More than half of the women agreed with Stephanie's positive interpretation, but Lin quickly added an addendum which shed new light on their multiple roles when she read her narrative:

It's really a relief to be able to talk about being on overload and trying to balance family, work, and school. As I took on more and more responsibilities outside the home, I slowly learned to be silent on the subject of role conflict because I got the message that my complaints were viewed as inappropriate, not only by my family at home, but also by my supervisors at work, and to a lesser extent by my professors on campus.

Indeed, more than half of the women recalled a specific instance when they were told by classroom teachers at their job sites that it is considered "unprofessional" to connect one's family life to job-related issues. For example, Cassandra told the class that she had been taken aside by her supervising teacher one day and reprimanded for sympathizing with a sick child who became upset when her

mother (a bank teller) sent a baby-sitter to pick her up because she couldn't leave her job. The teacher told Cassandra, "It's this kind of attitude that prevents women from making progress in the corporate world." Both I and several of the women in the class immediately wanted to know what Cassandra thought about the teacher's view of women in the workplace. She said:

If that (bank teller) woman was making any progress in the corporate world, she wouldn't be worrying about losing her job, she would have been able to get someone else to cover for her at work and then taken her kid home. But, "Ms. S" being a young, unmarried teacher with a degree and a professional title, couldn't relate to part-time bank-teller mothers who work for low hourly pay and have no job security.

Although their college professors were mentioned less often in relation to role conflicts, some paras said they resented an attitude they noticed on campus -- one which assumed that college attendance is an "option" for working women only if they are willing to put their studies *first*. Janice summarized the womens' perspective on role conflicts saying,

It's a situation where families, supervisors, and professors all want to be the first priority. Since I have to live with my family, I have to put them first, and I have to earn a living, so I put that second, then comes school because I can't go to school if I don't earn a living, and I'd have no reason to be in school at my age if not for my family. You know, making their lives better and being a good role model for my kids, that's the main reason for coming to school. It always seems to come back to family, at least for me.

Thus, the image of the over-burdened extension cord served to draw out some of the specific circumstances surrounding the paras' social construction as "silent facilitators" and helped me to distinguish their process of assimilation from those reported in the published literacy narratives of working-class academics. The womens' observations and comments also illuminated the educational conflicts they faced at this particular crossroad where they contemplate the leap from "paras" to "professionals" -- especially those concerning their fears about the rising expectations and work load that may accompany their transition to liberal arts education.

After this discussion of their views on some of the

conflicts these working mothers face, our class time ran out and I faced a long weekend of reflection from which I emerged with renewed energy. However, after reading a large sample of narratives, I also had a clear sense that without regular pay raises or work related knowledge as incentives, my writing class could very well become a site of conflict and frustration for these women -- that is, unless it could offer them a means to imagine a new relationship to higher education, mediating between their low vocational aspirations and a more expansive vision of academic knowledge and future professional goals.

On Sunday night (September 15th), I finally settled down to record some of my thoughts and plans in my teaching journal. I wrote:

These classroom journals on the intellectual, educational, and professional benefits of college attendance began with some specific statements about the paras' campus experience, such as, access to teaching methods and attaining a more solid foundation in reading and math. However, their accounts of their own access to work outside the home and higher education quickly moved on to discussions of the benefits they perceived for their children (in terms of

class placement and academic achievement) and for their families (with regard to added income). The image of the "multi-functional mom" that emerged in Stephanie's narrative helped the women use writing to identify and express a conflict between their domestic lives and their college attendance. Since their lives in the home and at their job sites are such predominant sub-themes in their writing about their campus experience, I can see the possibility of deriving some real benefits from narrative accounts of conflict among their multiple roles. Perhaps these journals could provide the paras with a means for critiquing the status quo, and a forum for transforming it as well.

From Subordinates to Active Participants:  
Co-developing a Critical Curriculum

Pedagogically, I was trying to deploy a critical curriculum which questions the specific subordination of this group of women. I aim to foster the critical literacy Ira Shor describes in *Empowering Education* as "questioning the status quo" (13), and Mike Rose explains in *Lives on the Boundary* as, "An ability to frame an argument, take someone else's argument apart, systematically inspect a document, an issue, or an event, apply a theory to disparate phenomenon,

and so on" (188).

Thus, I came to the next class session on Monday, September 16th with an invitation for the women to visit the Robert J. Kibbee Library at Kingsborough during the second class hour. To orient them to systematic planning and analysis of our reading material, I used the first class hour to propose a process we might use to gather and select reading material for the course, explaining that from this point on, they would decide not only what we read, but when we moved from one text to another. I presented the purpose of this student-centered process as enacting a long-overdue reversal of their roles from spectators and subordinates in an educational setting to active participants in curriculum design. In addition, I formally presented my invitation to compose autobiographical journals and reflective narratives on readings as part of a curriculum the paras would codevelop with me. As Shor points out, "Education for empowerment is not something done by teachers to students for their own good, but something students codevelop for themselves, led by a critical and democratic teacher" (20).

As soon as I made it clear that these classroom journals would *count* as a legitimate component of their assigned writing for the course, the women quickly agreed to participate in this enterprise, that is, to codevelop two

forms of narrative productions and to dedicate an hour of class time each week to composing and sharing them.<sup>10</sup> After some debate, the women chose "family," "work," and "student life" as their generative themes<sup>11</sup> for autobiographical narratives because a number of issues surrounding these themes could be drawn from the material they had already introduced in their observations and commentary on para life. The themes for their other major writing, the reflective journals on gender issues, class conflicts, and race relations emerged later on from our discussions of the materials gathered from the library and from reading material chosen from three other sources: articles the women collected from popular magazines such as *Redbook* and *Ladies Home Journal*; editorials on current events from newspapers; and essays distributed in their sociology, psychology, and education classes. To supplement these student selections, I introduced the departmentally assigned anthology *One*

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<sup>10</sup>During this first month we devoted all of our class time to planning the curriculum and developing a workable pattern for the two forms of narratives. Thereafter, we set aside the first class hour every Monday for narratives, alternating between autobiographical accounts and narrative reflections on readings.

<sup>11</sup>Generative themes grow out of student culture and express problematic conditions in daily life that are useful for generating critical discussion. Freire discusses generative themes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and *Education for Critical Consciousness*. Ira Shor also illustrates the generative theme method in *Empowering Education*. For a report on the use of generative themes in a writing curriculum designed for adult women in the Bahamas, see Kyle Fiore and Nan Elsasser's "Strangers No More: A Liberatory Literacy Curriculum" in *College English* 44(1982):115-128.

*World, Many Cultures* from which the class gathered additional sources for short readings. Finally, the paras chose Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* from a departmentally approved freshman writing list of approximately twelve full-length works. I dismissed the class from the library after each woman had elected to participate in one of five peer groups and had gathered at least one suggestion for reading material to be shared with her group at the next class session.

On Wednesday, September 18th, we began to organize the curriculum. This part of the negotiation process went smoothly; the paras wrote about selected themes in peer groups, and I compiled and organized their selections to compose a reading list and a course outline. Although the final syllabus was extensive, I assumed that we would use it as a *guide*, adding and/or subtracting material as the interests and concerns of the students emerged throughout the semester. As I distributed the long-awaited syllabus, however, the paras moved from stunned silence to verbal protest in less than a minute. A few retrieved calculators from their bags and tallied the number of pages in the reading selections. Others suggested that I had cleverly used the idea of "small groups" to "divide and conquer" the class, that is, to encourage each group to work

independently so that no one saw the "total picture" of mounting work until it was "too late." The paras let me know that they were angry, not because I had *imposed* a difficult syllabus upon them, but because I had *used* them to collaborate on a syllabus they could not, and would not live with. Later on, I learned that this mutual process had actually pre-empted their routine "downward" negotiation of workloads routinely and unilaterally assigned by traditional instructors in the past. Instead, in power-sharing or co-developing, the paras negotiated with each other, or as they put it, "fought for the articles they wanted to read and the themes they wanted to explore." Faced by their dismay at the big syllabus they had created, I negotiated through their resistance by suggesting that the women form "special interests groups" for each topic at the next class session (Monday, September 23rd) which would review the readings and then report back to the class on their findings. In this way, every article would be read and evaluated only by one special interest group, after which only some selections would be assigned to the class. Happy with this reduced workload, the women came to the next class on Monday eager to organize three committees on gender, class, and race to review the readings.

Although this process produced a final reading list

that everyone endorsed as "fair" and "realistic," it did not alleviate the paras' discomfort with active participation in the decision-making aspects of the course. No matter how I negotiated with them, we invariably reached a moment when their working-class expectations and learned school habits conflicted with my critical intentions. Such moments of conflict continued to surface throughout the process of curriculum planning (usually in the midst of a philosophical debate among themselves). If they did not reach consensus on an issue reasonably soon in their peer groups, one of them would inevitably voice her frustration with the whole process of negotiation and debate. They wanted me the teacher-expert to provide quick, right answers they could use. As Monique, a forty-two-year-old Haitian mother of five put it:

Who cares? None of this is relevant to my life, anyway. I don't need all of this philosophical debate to teach second grade. They don't pay school teachers to voice their opinions about this and that -- they pay them to apply a particular set of methods laid out by the Board of Ed. That's what I came to college to learn, that's what I want from this class, a method for writing my term papers.

As Monique's discomfort with prolonged critical inquiry and decision-making clearly illustrates, the paras understood the purpose of higher education to be "learning how to do things from those who know best." For most, college had become routine, filling a small slot in their daily schedules, much like doing the laundry or going grocery shopping. The courses were complementary to each other, the work load predictable, and student life, was therefore manageable. By contrast, my critical writing class not only involved them in the responsibilities of co-governance but also presented their everyday life as problems for successive levels of reflective inquiry. It's not easy to grow into the habit of such inquiry. Because they are used to the old "banking"<sup>12</sup> routines of education which ask them to memorize and regurgitate facts, not to think critically, my invitation to reflect was resisted because it asked something more, something new, something even threatening.

This resistance to complex, critical thought has been discussed by Rose Zimbardo, formerly of The City College of New York's Center for Worker Education, who notes that her students have "suffered at the hands of the educational

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<sup>12</sup>In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire defines the banking concepts of education as "An act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (58).

establishment and if they believe they have little or nothing to offer, it is because they have been taught to believe so" (209). The paras' narratives on work and student life support Zimbardo's findings.<sup>13</sup> For example, although they claim that the fear of losing touch with the familiar rhythm of their vocational classes causes their resistance to academic work, turning them from "aspiring teachers" into "career paras," they typically view this fear as a self-imposed limitation, not as the result of social, economic, and cultural forces which limit their intellectual and professional development. It was only through critical discussion and analysis of their everyday lives that these women eventually began to use their narratives to question the relationship between their domestic/work experiences and their academic progress.

However, at the time (the middle of week three), I felt overwhelmed by the task of organizing the revised reading list and photo-copying supplementary material on these themes to distribute on Wednesday, September 25th. I wrote

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<sup>13</sup>Zimbardo discusses the dilemma she faces in adult education teaching to uncover "hidden ideologies." She says, "The paradox I encounter in assuming this approach is that while they (adult students) are often more sophisticated and aware of their history...they are, at the same time, unaware of the ways in which social forces that operate upon us have affected their own lives" (210). Zimbardo also addresses the gendered/class position of her adult women students, who, she says, "Almost without exception come from homes where boys are thought to be more valuable than girls and in which intelligence in a woman is thought to be a social defect which should be disguised at all costs" (209).

briefly Monday night in my teaching journal:

The second week of classes produced little written material as the women were busy with the tasks of reading selection and negotiation of the curriculum. They decided to endorse a flexible course schedule whereby reading material would be chosen as the class progressed from one theme to another. They wanted their autobiographical accounts to shape at least some of the selections they read for narrative reflections. Therefore, to get them down to the task of writing on Wednesday, I am going to suggest that we begin with self-generated texts.

It's not a "Problem," It's My "Reality":  
Inscribing the Facts of Para Life

On Wednesday, September 25th, we began our first full-length autobiographical narrative session.<sup>14</sup> Initially, the paras used these self-generated narratives (which I will discuss in detail, later) as a means to *record* their life experiences. Thus, they did not present the role conflicts that surfaced in their texts as problems, but rather, as

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<sup>14</sup>The women had agreed to compose autobiographical accounts and narrative reflections on readings on alternate weeks.

"facts of life" to be *documented* in their journals and *confirmed* through dialogue with other paras in the room. Pedagogically, I structured the recurrent themes emerging in these first self-generated narratives as material I wanted to pose as problems<sup>15</sup> for changing their aspirations, intellectual habits, and literacy style. To speak more concretely about how I employ problem-posing, I can report in some detail on the womens' initial interpretations of their autobiographical texts and my attempts to re-present their accounts from multiple perspectives. From the start, I wanted the paras to participate, to be active and thoughtful, to examine their narrative accounts from their own points of view. At the same time, I wanted them to take a critical attitude toward their own experiences, that is, to raise questions about their own subjectivity in relation to their stories. Thus, pedagogically, my aim was to foster an awareness of their stories as localized accounts that relate to larger social issues in society. To encourage multiple perspectives, I asked each member of the class to compose an autobiographical narrative in which she defined

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<sup>15</sup>In *Empowering Education*, Ira Shor defines "problem-posing" as a pedagogical approach that "offers all subject matter as historical products to be questioned rather than as universal wisdom to be accepted" (32). Shor points out, "The responsibility of the problem-posing teacher is to diversify subject matter and to use students' thought and speech as the base for developing critical understanding of personal experience, unequal conditions in society, and existing knowledge...posing knowledge in any form as a problem for mutual inquiry" (33).

two of her roles (wife, mother, worker, student, and so on) as she views them in relation to each other. Some paras wrote humorous caricatures, like Janice's account of her *transformation* from "Mary Poppins" at her school job site to "Cinderella's Stepmother" at home. As she reported, "There's just so much patience to go around -- and my own kids are always last in line." Others offered more serious and concrete evidence of their role conflicts, telling stories of latch-key children, domestic violence, divorce, and bitter custody battles. A memorable example of the difference between the humorous and the more serious approach to role conflict emerged in the narratives of Stephanie and Cassandra. Stephanie's account of the intersection between her domestic and working lives centered on a family protest over how her going to work "left the dog home alone all day." By contrast, Cassandra's narrative about coming to college as a single-mother related an episode of sibling rivalry that ended with "fourteen-year-old Beverly locking five-year-old Shaneka in the closet one night while *mommy* was at school."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>These divergent accounts of working-class female experience raise the profiles of race and marital status among the paras, while also calling attention to the various "caste positions" among these women, by which I mean the social and economic inequalities among working-class families. Specifically, Stephanie, a white woman, married to a gainfully employed electrician faced a "demeaning" show of family opposition to her working outside the home. Cassandra, a single African-American mother faced the genuine and potentially dangerous rage of her older

Specifically, I was struck, not only by the contrast presented in these two accounts, but by the women's *matter-of-fact* presentation, and by the paras' *humorous* response to them. Clearly, Stephanie saw her social construction in the family (companion to the dog) as an insult to her domestic role and an unpleasant option to work outside the home. But her narrative made no reference to the more significant conflicts inherent in her daily life as a working-mother with four school-aged children. While Cassandra openly admitted that her older daughter is angry about taking care of younger siblings, she viewed her situation, not as a function of her status as an African-American single-mother who cannot afford adequate child care, but as a "inevitable" conflict between a parent and a teenager, locating the blame individually rather than socially. Thus, instead of situating their roles in relation to each other, the paras' first narratives offered "episodes" of family life in which the underlying social, cultural, gender, and class issues were left unexplored. In addition, the obvious disparities (of economics, race, and marital status) encoded in these different accounts of family life -- stories that explicitly defined the diverse and unequal realities among the paras --

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children who were left at home to baby-sit for younger siblings while their mother attended college.

were absent from the womens' discussion of the texts.

That evening (Wednesday, September 25th), my teaching journal overflowed with questions that I could not answer -- and "red flags" that I could not ignore. Later that evening, I wrote:

I am caught between two conflicting impulses. On one hand, I feel the need to cultivate deeper inquiry into the womens' diverse experiences of class and gender. On the other hand, I'm relieved that comparisons of *individual* circumstances did not immediately surface because I want the paras to situate their collective stories within a larger social context before moving on to more complex and individual issues of race, ethnicity, and marital status among themselves -- special conditions of culture that complicate class and gender for some of them. In addition, I also see that these stories, rich with specificity, have particular value to my teaching approach because they bring into my classroom significant moments of para experience....

Thus, my pedagogical goal at this point was twofold: First, it was necessary to acknowledge these narratives as

meaningful representations of the literacies and life experiences the women brought with them to class. To accomplish this first objective, I made sure that each narrative was read, enjoyed, and discussed in class -- even though some of the paras felt that their "issue" had been raised (and resolved) through commentary on previous texts.<sup>17</sup> As Pat Belanoff suggests,

Pulling students away from the particulars of their lives, their stories of themselves, may create crippling disjunction in their lives outside of school. And acceding to the possibility that we cannot change any of this until the world outside changes may cripple us (268).

Second, it was important to re-present<sup>18</sup> their stories to

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<sup>17</sup>Although some of the paras shared their views on everything, others had thus far remained silent. For democratic teaching, I wanted to ensure that each para established a "voice" in the classroom. Later in the term, the women volunteered to share their own narratives (or parts thereof) with the class, and most offered material from their journals to me for comments. At the end of the term, each para submitted copies of her semester-long narrative productions which comprised one-third of the grade in the course, (assigned essays and the final exam making up the remaining two thirds).

<sup>18</sup>With regard to method, representing the students' stories involves synthesizing their statements and dialogue into questions and comments posed for critical reflection. To do this, I take notes on (and, occasionally) audio tape their reading of narratives and the class commentary on them, as well. I read my notes or play the tape back to them and ask them what questions and issues seem to be recurring in both the texts and their dialogue and which ones they think we should focus on. I list their suggestions on the blackboard so that they can see the conversation

them, calling attention to the operative forces of class, gender, race, and ethnicity that impact their lives. To accomplish this second objective (representing their stories) at this first full-length narrative session, I took notes on the paras' narratives and our classroom dialogue for future reference, but I did not immediately attempt to synthesize student response while the class was in session. Instead, I asked the women to write a follow-up journal that explored one aspect of culture (race, ethnicity, social class, family, religion, media, education, and so on) that they believed influenced the story they told. In this way, the paras were able to actively participate in re-presenting their own stories.

The follow-up narratives, which were written on Tuesday, October 1st,<sup>19</sup> proved helpful in my attempt to synthesize the material from the paras' first narratives. For example, Laura had written about a moment of conflict with her "traditional Jewish mother" over the convenience vs. the safety of microwave cooking. She used her follow-up narrative to examine the influence of *family*. Many paras had criticized her original narrative because she inhabited

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they are hearing. After a number of key issues are presented by the students, I offer my own perceptions and suggestions about how we might proceed to the next level of inquiry.

<sup>19</sup>The college calendar was amended to accommodate Yom Kippur on Monday, September 30th.

the "daughter role." "The journals are supposed to be about being wives, mothers, workers, and students," they said. In her follow-up text, Laura suggested that the microwave in her kitchen had become a *symbol* to her mother of other changes in her life (getting divorced, returning to work, coming to college). "The *real* role conflict," she wrote, "centers on my new-found freedom -- living alone, not being chained to the kosher kitchen -- with two sets of everything, that is, the double-duty of being a traditional Jewish housewife." Response to this follow-up was also mixed; some of the paras noted that it stressed the influence of "ethnicity and religion" more than "family." Others thought that it wandered too far from the original topic -- the intersection of multiple roles. They suggested that Laura's original journal was really about a conflict between domestic duties and working outside the home -- no time to cook. By contrast, they characterized her follow-up, which raised religious, ethnic, and generational issues, as "going off on a tangent."

Pedagogically, then, one of the challenges I faced in re-presenting these early narratives was to question the paras' conditioned way of reading what the teacher wants. They I wanted to encourage them to maintain their focus on specific events in everyday life, but at the same time, I

wanted to encourage a connection between personal experience and larger multiple contexts. To foster the kind of inclusiveness and flexibility so evident in Laura's texts, I asked the women to define the concept of "role conflict." After a brief period of silence, Stephanie became impatient, took *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology* out of her book-bag and read the definition aloud: "Tensions in coping with the requirements of incompatible roles, for example, the roles of worker and mother, or lecturer and researcher" (422). The women finally agreed that Laura's role as the daughter of a "traditional Jewish mother" conflicted with her roles as a worker and a student because she didn't have time to cook. In response, I asked the paras to explain why Laura's follow-up combined the *influence* of family with other cultural forces such as religion, ethnicity, and age. I asked the women, "Can family be separated from its religious roots, ethnic affiliations, or generational differences?" Nine out of ten agreed that these aspects of culture play a significant role in how we interpret the meaning of family.<sup>20</sup> I concluded our synthesis of the issues in Laura's journals by suggesting that in the process

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<sup>20</sup>The paras' narratives on domestic life revealed diverse opinions on the "boundaries" of "family" -- ranging from the nuclear model living together, to extended family (blood relations), to more symbolic models including godparents, close friends, to racial, ethnic, religious affiliations -- which will be discussed in detail later.

of considering multiple aspects of culture, Laura was able to infer that the presence of a microwave in her kitchen symbolizes deeper conflicts for her mother. Laura agreed, and added her own comment:

In writing the follow-up narrative, I came to the conclusion that my mother actually recreates the conflicts in her own life through me...she did it all, worked in a factory all week and cooked for the family all weekend in a kosher kitchen -- without a microwave. What I didn't see until I started writing about the influence of "family" is that, for me, family influence is attached to a large amount of cultural, religious, and gender baggage that I don't like to think about, and that I never talk about. In writing the follow-up narrative the idea that the microwave represented a deeper conflict just came to me.

I take this type of discovery to be Rose's notion of critical literacy cited earlier. During the composing process, seeing the deeper meaning of surface items was something that would be experienced by other women. That is, they began to see a more complex story emerging from a simpler one when they explored the issue from various

perspectives. As Sondra Perl notes, "It is by gaining access to and drawing upon the 'never before said' that we are able to create a new story, a new version of ourselves" (430-31).

As other follow-up journals were read, the impact of cultural forces on the paras' multiple roles continued to emerge. For example, Janice's lighthearted narrative about being "Mary Poppins" to other people's children at school, only to turn into "Cinderella's Stepmother" at home illustrated a conflict between her roles as a worker and a mother. In her follow-up journal, she recast the conflict in ways that suggested how educational and social forces influenced her behavior. Although clearly disorganized and rambling, her text alluded to the power of unconscious mechanisms that operate upon us in different social contexts -- a theme that the class was eager to examine. Janice opened her narrative by defining her dual role (working-mother) as one complicated and frustrated by the "sameness of duties." At the same time, she acknowledged that the "duties" elicited two different kinds of behavior from her:

The "Mary Poppins of P.S. 212," she wrote, "would suffer the unfortunate consequence of being fired if she lost her cool at school, while the "Cinderella's

Stepmother of Benson Avenue" would lose her mind if she didn't lose her cool once in a while at home.

Janice chose education as the cultural force that influenced her roles as a mother and a worker. Unfortunately, she characterized her vastly different behavior in these two settings as "schizophrenic." Specifically, Janice said she enacted what she called "textbook techniques" in the classroom and relied upon the parenting practices she remembered from her own upbringing at home. To my surprise, many of the women admitted that, like Janice, they divided child-care into two patterns of behavior -- what they called the *learned response* at school vs. the *natural response* at home. This commentary introduced a conflict between the communication techniques that the paras learned in college and the child-rearing patterns they actually believed in and practiced at home. Some said that they tried to apply the knowledge they acquired in their education classes to their relationships with their own children, but found the difficulties almost insurmountable. Valerie, a forty-six-year-old mother of two teenage sons summarized a masculine obstacle many paras faced at home when she said:

Reasoned verbal communication does work best *in the*

long run if it has been an ongoing process in the child's life and everyone agrees that it's the right thing to do. Unfortunately, my husband has a violent temper and a short fuse. In my house, if I don't yell at the boys sufficiently, my husband will hit them. I'm afraid that at ages 13 and 15, they might someday decide to hit him back, so I yell -- sufficiently -- to defuse the situation.

Herein lay a deep issue of patriarchy, embedded in a generative theme about home discipline which further confirms the distinctions between these adult women students and the young working-class academics who wrote literacy narratives. In short, although the paras are learning, and to some extent, internalizing new social attitudes and more effective communication techniques through their encounters with higher education, their long-term positions of subordination as wives and mothers in their home culture conflict with the wider range of choices they read about in their college text books. Thus, their process of cultural separation and assimilation is complicated by their age and gendered roles. Unlike the young, unmarried, and childless "Scholarship Boys and Girls" who moved on to elite campuses far away from home where they were free to experiment with new ways of thinking and acting, these older working women

with permanent identities and multiple roles in working-class culture, come home every day to an environment that short-circuits their attempts to experiment with alternative views and practices, keeping them rooted in the norms of their home cultures despite their long-term exposure to campus life.

Although I wanted to continue working on these texts, some of the paras, ever mindful of the *syllabus*, reminded me that our next narrative session on Wednesday, October 2nd, would focus on their reflective narratives on selected readings.

#### Between Storytelling and Academic Writing: Negotiating the Boundaries

While their self-generated narratives provided some space for the paras to critically reflect on the conflicts among their multiple roles, their narrative reflections on readings about gender issues, class conflicts, and race relations encouraged their perspectives on a wider range of social issues. Because the paras have been working at similar job sites and taking college classes together for a number of years, they assume an intimate knowledge of each other based on their common experiences on the job and in their vocational classes (where predominant anti-dialogic

teacher-talk and one-way "banking classes" have silenced their exploration of their own voices and diversity). By contrast, their narrative responses invited reflective debate about readings which inevitably led to some disagreements. In this way, critical inquiry brought out some of the diversity in this seemingly tight-knit group, thus turning a falsely simplistic "community of paras" into an authentically complex one.

At the next class session on Wednesday, October 2nd, some of the paras were eager to begin the narrative reflections on readings (which I will discuss, in detail, later), but others felt that it was "too early" to incorporate outside sources into their journal writing. The paras' perceived need to separate their personal narratives from academic writing was most clearly expressed by Joan who noted that narratives and essays require different composing styles. She described the difference in a journal entitled "Interpreting and Translating Stories":

In writing about my life and hearing other paras' narratives, I began to see perspectives that were hidden when I acknowledged only "the familiar" in my story. Mostly, I think that I carried a single interpretation of my life around for years as if a

little tape recorder inside my head could "play back" the facts of my past. The self-generated narratives helped to change that narrow view and encouraged me to connect different kinds of experiences and to interpret how one part of my story is linked to another ...In formal papers, though, I find myself struggling to "translate" the author's meaning. I don't feel that I can interpret their experiences (which is different than mine). I have to evaluate their story from a more objective perspective in a more formal language than I use in my journals. The best writing I've ever done is in my personal journal, and I don't want it to become a book of essays (which I don't know how to write).

Indeed, Joan's narrative provided an accurate description of the paras' formal essays -- which, so far, had been unimaginative, brief documents lacking the depth and clarity I had come to expect from their narrative journals. However, as I wrote in my teaching journal that night:

The autobiographical accounts provide much critical insight into the conflicts these women encounter and should remain as an integral part of the narrative process. In particular, the fact that Joan

characterized her autobiographical narratives as complex representations of her life confirmed their importance from a pedagogical, as well as a personal perspective. The paras' autobiographical accounts disrupted some hermetically sealed experiences, bringing a few of their multiple roles into contact with each other and bringing the women in touch with some of the complexities of their lives. Thus, I can see the benefit of preserving the non-academic discourse in their narrative productions.

At the same time, I hoped that the narrative reflections on readings would provide a linkage and transition from an illumination of para culture to an entry into the larger world of literature, what Sondra Perl calls, "New tales and tellings called out by the stories of others" (430).

To negotiate this transition, I suggested that we codevelop some guidelines for reflective narratives that would preserve the boundaries between narrative productions and academic writing. The guidelines the women suggested were as follows: first, they agreed to reconvene their committees on gender, class, and race and to select a spokesperson from each group to negotiate with me after

class. Second, they suggested we begin the reflective narratives with Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. (This decision was based on the delegates' assertion that the novel presented all of the issues the narratives would address and provided the best opportunity to discuss them from a number of perspectives). Further, they decided on a flexible approach to the selected themes -- one that might combine issues of gender, class, and/or race in a single narrative. The delegates also reminded me that the novel was two-hundred-and-sixteen pages long, and suggested that the first reflective narrative be confined to the "Preface" so as to allow the students a week to read and reflect on the rest of the novel -- I agreed. Finally, they voiced their concerns about negotiating the boundaries between articulating personal experience and commenting on outside sources. I recognized that personal experience was relevant to their reflective narratives and I encouraged them to incorporate it into this format. I also reminded them that these narratives on outside readings were not intended to replace their autobiographical journals, but merely to supplement and enhance them.

As the tone of this meeting suggests, despite the women's limited experience with college writing, they already approached composing in much the same way as Pamela

Annas described our teacherly response to it:

We may sometimes feel that on one hand there is experiential writing -- journals, sketches, response papers -- which we perhaps won't grade or will read with our usual critical faculties suspended. We may value women's creative writing while at the same time feeling that it is very different from expository writing, the actual essay or research paper, which on the other hand we have been trained to think should be based on what the authorities say rather than on personal experience, and on "hard" data rather than "soft" (360).

After we established consensus on the terms of our agreement, the paras composed their first reflective narratives on Monday, October 7th. To maintain the familiarity of our narrative sessions, I kept my approach to reflective narratives consistent with the one I employed for the autobiographical journals. Each para was asked to read from her written response to Morrison's opening passage. I took notes and invited the women to share their observations and comments. Angelica volunteered to go first:

In the opening passage of *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison writes about an average American family playing ball in the backyard...She uses short simple sentences to introduce the young narrator of the novel, nine-year-old Claudia MacTeer...The gradual disappearance of punctuation and word-spacing represents the author's attempt to introduce the theme of "family dysfunction" in the novel.

Since one of my pedagogical goals for the reflective narratives is to foster what Linda Christensen calls, "An ability to switch in and out of the language of the powerful" (38), I was encouraged by Angelica's movement in this brief text from summary to analysis and interpretation. At the same time, I noticed that she limited her commentary to the formal (third person) voice. There was no narrative "I" in her text and no narrative connection between her own experience and the family scene she interpreted.

By contrast, the paras' response to this text centered on Angelica's use of the term "dysfunctional," and the assumptions it made about the families in the novel.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>I would later learn that Angelica and other paras who had previously taken developmental writing (approximately one-third of the class) had already read and written essays on *The Bluest Eye* and that they had been instrumental in the selection of this novel as our full-length reading.

Cassandra was particularly disturbed by what she called Angelica's "labeling" of the African-American families in the novel as "dysfunctional." She proceeded to read her narrative, entitled, "Black and White," in which she argued that the "normal" family in the opening passage represents the "White" family, an "ideal" to which all of the Black families in the novel are negatively compared. "As an African-American woman," she wrote, "I was upset to see that a well-known Black author created no positive images of Black people in this novel." This statement was immediately challenged by other women in the class who viewed the African-American MacTeer family as stable and supportive, if not "ideal." Many of the white paras (who were visibly uncomfortable with the topic of race relations) raised objections to Cassandra's assumption that the "storybook family" in the "Preface" is white (because race is never mentioned in the passage). Janice's comments summed up this idea succinctly:

The difference between the ideal family in the passage and the families in the novel has nothing to do with race. People who live in "very pretty green and white houses" have money, people who live in "broken down houses with cracks in the windows" and take in boarders

don't have money. The author doesn't tell us what race the "storybook family" is because it is *money* that separates them from the families in the novel.

Janice's attempt to "deracinate" the text by substituting "class" for "race" only added to Cassandra's fury. She would not be silenced, and countered Janice's remark with the quip, "How many of you Black women would name your kids Dick and Jane? Get *real* Janice, this ideal family is white." Janice responded by asking, "How many of us white women would name our kids Dick and Jane? The passage represents the fictional all-American family of the past -- like *Leave it to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*." "Yeah," Cassandra countered, "rich white families." Janice conceded this point, and Cassandra had the last word.

This heated discussion had illuminated an intersection of race and class (an issue that I wanted to pose as a problem for critical inquiry). However, as time was running out and I did not want to move to a discussion of how race and class are portrayed in the "Preface" from only two student reports, I decided to dismiss the class and bring the paras back to reading from their own texts at the next class session.

On Wednesday October 9th, I asked the women to take

notes on each narrative reflection as it was being read and to hold all of their comments until everyone had a chance to share her text. As the women read their narratives, it became obvious that the class was indeed *divided* along racial lines, but the *split* involved more than a response to the material in the "Preface." As Gloria, a thirty-eight-year-old mother of five suggested,

You have to read the entire novel and also the "Afterward" to understand the relationship between "Preface" and the rest of the book. Some of us have done that in a developmental writing class. Our instructor spent a lot of time connecting the "Preface" to the novel, and some of the narratives in this class reflect that approach. For the sake of those who did not read the whole novel yet, I think we should try to compose narrative reflections on the material in the "Preface."

I thanked Gloria for sharing this information with me and offered her proposal to the class. Most of the women (who were at various points in their reading of the novel) said that the "Preface" was *too short* and acquired most of its *real meaning* from the text that followed it. I used this

opportunity to pose a question for narrative reflection on the "Preface" (which I believed contained a great deal of material to be mined). I asked the women to form four groups and suggested that each group devise a definition of the "average American family" as it is depicted in the "Preface." This exercise in abstraction was a way for me to re-present the problem to the students for their deeper reflection. Although members of individual groups reached consensus rather quickly, significant variance appeared between groups in their interpretations of the passage. The first group asserted that the passage depicted a "higher socio-economic class," not the "average American family," as they knew it: "Toni Morrison is describing a well-to-do family with a backyard and lots of leisure time for parents and children to play together." The second group saw the depiction of the two-parent family with one boy, one girl, a dog, and a cat as a stereotypical representation of the "nuclear family": "The author is describing the ideal family with two parents, two kids, and two pets, not the average American family." The third group noted the "laughing mother" and the "smiling father" as the most significant aspect of the passage because the concept of "domestic bliss" is part of the great American myth of family life. They argued, "The passage describes the 'happy' family, not

the average American family." The fourth group asserted that Morrison describes the "average American family" as we know it from the media. They concluded, "The family in the passage is an accurate reflection of the "model" that all families in America aspire to become, even though most are not."

I was impressed by the multiple levels of theorizing in the groups' conceptualizations of the "American family" in this short passage. "If all of these interpretations are *valid*," I asked the women, "Then where is the thematic center [the main idea] in this passage -- and who is this family?" Using their collective definitions as a guide, the paras abstracted the most significant qualities of the family as: economically secure, two-parent, happy, and adored by American culture. After some deliberation, Stephanie suggested that:

The thematic center of the passage is found in the idea that Morrison makes up a family that seems familiar to all of us, but isn't representative of most of us. It's familiar because it's an "ideal," the way life is supposed to be, but more often than not, it's not.

Other women noted that it's familiar to those of us who grew

up in the 1950's and 60's "when television made us believe that everyone lived that way."

Through these interpretations of the model family, I saw that the paras were constructing a "theory" of their world(s) -- the ideal world they are supposed to be living in vs. the one they inhabit. In this exercise, they were enacting critical literacy, that is, "reading the world and the word," as Freire put it, critically reading their social experience in relation to a printed text, and relating personal context to a text. Still, there remained one more issue to confront -- the intersection of race and class that had launched our critical inquiry. To re-present this question, I asked the women to examine the four characteristics they assigned to the family in the passage and to write a reflective narrative that offered some suggestions on how race and class are implicated in these social markers. The first (financially secure family) was easy -- everyone agreed it's a class issue. The second (two-parent family) presented multiple layers of interpretation. Some of the women wrote narratives that pointed to the rise in single-parent households across racial groups and the increase in the number of Black middle-class families. As Joan put it, "Having two parents is no longer a 'given' if you are White -- and no longer

"unusual" if you are Black." Others suggested that race was still a primary distinction in single-parent households. For example, as a single African-American mother, Cassandra wrote of the "sexual irresponsibility" that permeates African-American (male) culture and the "economic reality" that places most African-American families in poorer groups. She noted that, "Statistically,<sup>22</sup> African-American women are more likely to be single-mothers and African-American families are more likely to be poor. Therefore, race is implicated in Morrison's depiction of the two-parent family." The third quality (happiness) was seen by some as irrelevant to both race and class. As Lin wrote, "I used to be a housekeeper in Hong Kong. This lady I work for and all of her friends were miserable. I would not want to live her life." Others, like Gloria, disagreed: "Financial security does not guarantee happiness, but the scene depicted in this "Preface" would not be possible without money. Poor people (White or Black) have no time to play with their kids and no yard to play in. Therefore, class (but not race) is implicated in this depiction of "domestic bliss." The "model" family created by the media also received mixed response. Angelica's narrative suggested that the "ideal"

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<sup>22</sup>According to the 1996 U.S. Statistical Abstract (468, table 721), 14% of white women head households as compared to 45% of Black women.

family depicted on television and in the movies is usually both wealthy and White." Janice disagreed, pointing to "The Huxtables as the 'ideal image' for Black families," and concluded that "class supersedes race in Hollywood." What was most impressive about this exchange was the power of the "text" in mediating the paras' discussions of individual contexts of race and class. Fortunately, in this instance, the women demonstrated a keen capacity to find and interpret textual evidence -- which helped to defuse the racial tensions that had threatened to disrupt critical dialogue.

Composing the Classroom:  
Reflections on Pedagogy

My teaching journal continued to report on the paras' narratives and my pedagogical choices. On the evening of October 9th, exactly one month from the date of our first meeting, I wrote:

In retrospect, I am overwhelmed by the amount of written material produced and discussed in the first few weeks of the course. The paras became my partners in this critical teaching enterprise, as individual voices continued to emerge from the collective chorus that greeted me on the first day of class. Stories were

told, disagreements aired, and negotiation became the operative mode of classroom dialogue....

However, at this point, I was also mindful of the delicate balance I had to maintain between storytelling and critical inquiry, and the boundaries between personal expression and academic discourse that I wanted the paras to transcend. I was hopeful that the process of critical reflection on their previously unreflected experiences would encourage them to take what Jerome Bruner calls a "stance" (129) toward their material. A critical stance toward their generative themes may also bring them to what Freire called in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* "a perception of their previous perceptions" (108), or rewriting the reality which has so far kept them subordinate in all the spaces of their lives.

## Chapter Two

### Composing Para Culture: Literacy Narratives on Family, Work, and Student Life

#### Introduction

This chapter examines autobiographical accounts of everyday life composed by the paras on five alternate Mondays: October 14th, October 28th, November 11th, November 25th, and December 9th. Highlighting the themes "family," "work," and "student life," the narratives explored conflicts the paras encountered as they attempted to reconcile the demands of their multiple roles.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, additional narratives written by Janice, Stephanie, Joan, Monique, Gloria, Valerie, Cassandra, and Angelica will be discussed, along with journals written by Svetlana, a forty-eight-year-old divorced Russian immigrant and mother of three; Maria, a thirty-one-year-old Hispanic mother of four; and Michelina, a thirty-nine-year old Hispanic mother of four.

One of the most interesting challenges the women encountered in composing these narratives was defining the

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<sup>1</sup>Initially, the women agreed in advance that the sequence of narrative themes would begin with domestic life, but quickly discovered that the boundaries among their multiple roles often collapsed in their narratives. Later, they became more comfortable with the multiple themes that emerged from these journals.

thematic boundaries of their own material. Their early journals illuminated some diverse definitions of these themes by confronting the questions, "What constitutes a family,?" "Is housework real work,?" "Is campus life the only kind of student life?" Specifically, in exploring broad thematic boundaries, some women initially offered narrative retrospectives on childhood memories, recollections of early schooling, or prior experiences in other work settings -- spacious interpretations of "everyday life" that other paras resisted. These broader territories also included conflicted [adult] relationships with parents and siblings, thereby violating the privacy and alleged peace of the traditional [nuclear] definition of family that others viewed as the norm. In our discussions of these texts, some women voiced concerns that journals like these transgressed role boundaries, or as they put it, "took the focus off our families, our jobs as paras, and our college experiences." Eager to debate these conflicting representations of their themes, the women wanted me, the teacher, to mediate their differences and to provide safe, specific limits for their journals.

I took this opportunity to read a few short passages from my teaching journal aloud in class. I chose an excerpt from the first entry I made on September 7th in which I had

written some recollections of the students I had previously taught at Baruch College. I explained how I used these journal reflections on my past teaching experiences to help me identify some of the differences I noticed among the adult women in this class and to interpret some of the diverse perspectives and multiple themes I saw emerging in their first narratives. I also said that I see the teaching journal as a written interpretation of my thoughts, feelings, and responses to my students' writing, not as a mirror image of their views. Once their curiosity about my journal was satisfied (having passed it around the room for inspection and commentary), I suggested that each of them organize and develop her journals according to her own definitions of the themes. Happy with my seal of approval on their right to broad boundaries, the paras agreed to follow their inner voices.

From another perspective, the womens' critique of my educational "goals" for this mutual enterprise surfaced early, and often, in our classroom dialogues. Of particular interest [to me] was their apparent discomfort with their own enthusiasm for our narrative sessions. Although they came to class eager to write and explore these texts, their comments about the activity, itself, clearly indicated resistance to these journals developing disruptively into

what Ira Shor calls in *Empowering Education*, "knowledge that is reflective understanding" (21). Specifically, the women said they were unsure of the relationship between their accounts of everyday life and the process of critical inquiry they were supposed to undertake in their journals.<sup>2</sup> For example, in her self-portrait written on the first day of class, Joan described her family as "ordinary... not very interesting... not worth too much discussion in class." Yet, her text introduced the theme of conflicted gender relations in her household as a consequence of her re-entering the workforce:

Having no daughter, I have no help with housework because I never asked the boys to do "women's work."

This portrait of her domestic conditions not only generated sustained discussion on gender conflicts at home, but also prompted other paras to write follow-up texts on housework that raised the issue of how they, themselves, perpetuated a gendered socialization of their own children in relation to housework. As Angelica pointed out in her follow-up text:

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<sup>2</sup>Because their autobiographical journals were written concurrently with their reflective narratives on readings as well as more formal writing assignments in response to "outside sources," the women questioned their ability to develop their own themes into what they called "relevant issues." However, they soon discovered that many of the issues that emerged in these texts re-surfaced in assigned readings.

The habit of the males in my house to sit in front of the T.V. while I prepared dinner had to end when my husband left home. Working full-time and going to school, I could not get all the housework done.

Besides, no young working woman today would put up with this situation, and my four boys have to know this fact and get over the macho idea of being "masters of their houses."

The women were here gaining what Freire often referred to as "epistemological relation to reality," or a conscious critical knowledge of what before had been tacit and experiential. As their journals illuminated the dissonance between previously held assumptions about domestic chores and the present realities of their everyday lives, the women broadened their discussion of housework to include the values our culture assigns to it (which I will discuss later).

In addition to voicing their uncertainty about the quality of source material they could produce in their journals, the women also questioned the educational merit (or "credential value") of these texts. Thus, I was not surprised when they unanimously expressed concern about how their academic progress would be measured by this student-

centered critical form of writing. Even those few who were eager to explore the liberal arts curriculum (and looked forward to what they called the "rewards of a different kind of learning experience"), kept asking questions like, "What are we supposed to learn from these journals? "Are we going to use the issues we address to write a term paper on one of the themes?" "How are we going to be graded for this assignment?"

On one hand, I wanted to allay their fears and uncertainty, by arguing my case for the connection between their accounts of everyday life and larger social issues in society. Occasionally, I did illuminate correlations between their narrative accounts and the reading material, particularly when obvious associations or differentiations were glossed over in the womens' attempts to articulate specific details of their own conditions. For instance, although their narratives on domestic work illuminated some class distinctions in relation to Judy Syfers's "I Want A Wife" and Simone De Beauvoir's "The Married Woman," the common conditions of patriarchy (across class boundaries) were less visible and required some mediation on my part to facilitate deeper inquiry.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, their

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<sup>3</sup>Specifically, more than half of the women responded to these texts in terms of "middle-class" privilege to "stay home" without economic penalty to their lifestyles, while they ignored the authors' discussions of the subordinate gendered positions of middle-class homemakers.

questions about the purposes and benefits of writing these journals confirmed their uncertain participation in co-developing the curriculum. Their participation repositioned them from their defensive prior agenda of "downward negotiation of the workload" toward a tentative critical stance that questioned the goals and purposes of the course. Finally, the process of writing these self-generated texts invited the women to explore a number of composing strategies which developed them into more competent and creative writers.<sup>4</sup>

#### Crossing Borders: Defining Roles and Role Conflicts

"Is housework *real* work?" This was one of the most significant questions raised on October 14th when the paras<sup>1</sup> wrote their first self-generated autobiographical journals. As more than two-thirds of the "self-portraits" they wrote on the first day of class mentioned conflicts between their domestic chores and the responsibilities of their full-time jobs and college studies, the women were eager to examine the theme of "housework." First, let me say, I was

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<sup>4</sup>Their semester-long narrative productions illuminate a variety of composing styles and narrative strategies used to develop self-generated texts, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter Four.

impressed by the substance of these narratives (which reached beyond the mundane "laundry lists" of household tasks that appeared in their "self-portraits"<sup>5</sup> written on the first day of class) into deeper inquiries about the nature of work and how its meaning and value are determined in our culture. For example, Joan's narrative entitled "Helpful Hints for the Working Mother" illustrated the dissonance between her own understanding of domestic work and the pejorative assumptions she noticed in a pamphlet distributed to new paras by the Board of Education:

The booklet (which erroneously assumes that new paras have never worked before) offers "tips" for the working mother...I found its perspective on work (as something women do only outside the home) offensive. For example, a male author (I forget his name) begins his advice to female paras with the line, "Now that you're a working woman"...and goes on to offer "tips" on how to minimize the effect of household chores and child care on job performance...I wanted to reach through the open page, grab him by the scruff of his neck and tell him, "Listen, Buster...Women have always worked in the

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<sup>5</sup>For example, Stephanie, whose semester-long autobiographical narratives will be discussed in Chapter Four, offered a typical "self-portrait" in which a detailed list of household chores was enumerated and described.

home...It may be unpaid work, but that doesn't make it unimportant."

This journal sparked a number of comments about the pamphlet (which was clearly a condescending and superficial portrayal of the kinds of conflicts women encounter when they re-enter the paid workforce). However, in the discussion that followed, many women noted that the pamphlet actually reflected some widely held beliefs about the relationship between domestic life and paid employment. For example, Stephanie related an episode that took place shortly after she returned to work:

While filling out our income tax forms, our accountant suddenly said to my husband, "Well, Gary, how does it feel to finally have a working wife?"...I wanted to smack him...But I guess, in the eyes of a tax preparer, if something doesn't produce earned income, it's not work.

The women laughed as Cassandra called out, "HELLO, Stephanie! In the eyes of the entire world it's not work if you don't get paid for doing it."

As other women read their narratives, the conflicts

between the "low status" assigned to housework (by people who don't do it), and the worth they, themselves, place on it continued to surface, and the boundaries between roles and identities began to emerge in their writing. For example, in a narrative entitled "Keeping a House vs. Keeping a Home," Gloria wrote:

Keeping house is about my domestic role, but keeping a home is about who I am, it's not about money, it's really about taking care of the material things I love, which is an important part of taking care of the people I love.

This journal went on to render an account of the "symbolic meaning behind household objects," (telling how and when they were acquired and from whom, and how they are linked to a person's identity). Gloria concluded this journal with her personal assessment of keeping a home as "real work that I entrust only to myself." Although Gloria's perspective was understood (and respected) by most of the women, it raised questions for some paras about the time limits working women face -- what Janet Zandy refers to in *Calling Home*, as "the double work lives of working-class women" (5); others questioned what they saw as Gloria's "romanticized vision of

domestic life," some of them responding with humorous one-liners, like Angelica's, "I just cherish scrubbing the paint-splattered wooden floor that belongs to my landlord."

However, a more political perspective emerged in our follow-up discussion -- one that led us back to the little pamphlet Joan described in her narrative. Gloria, dissatisfied with the constant portrayal of housework as menial labor and servitude,<sup>6</sup> took out the Board of Ed. pamphlet and turned to the section entitled "Time Saving Tips" pointing out how "time saved" is always about decreasing the drudgery of domestic work..."Why not use some of your added income to invest in a microwave?," it says...like you have to give up your image of yourself as a cook in your own kitchen in order to be successful in the workforce." Throughout this discussion, the idea of "lowering standards" on the domestic front in exchange for career success divided the class into two camps: those who believed that pride in professional accomplishments would compensate for what they called "cutting a few corners at home," as opposed to those who insisted that a successful career does not always create a successful [or fulfilled]

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<sup>6</sup>During our negotiations on the syllabus, Gloria's peer group had reviewed Simone de Beauvoir's "The Married Woman," and Judy Syfers's "I Want a Wife," texts which paint a dismal picture of housework. The womens' narrative reflections on these essays will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

person. Although the two groups engaged each other in some lively debate, they shared a common bond in their collective assumption that women must choose between their domestic and professional identities or run the risk of failing miserably in both worlds. Bringing them back to the pamphlet that sparked this debate, I asked the women who brought the booklet to class to read a few selected passages aloud.<sup>7</sup> Although I agreed that the list of "do's" and "don'ts" was daunting (and insulting to anyone who has actually managed a household and raised a family), I asked the women to suspend their judgment of the author's assumptions, and instead, to analyze the suggestions for time-saving in light of their own individual priorities. Although they noted different "tips" as useful to their specific needs, everyone found something among the do's and don'ts that she could incorporate into her daily schedule.

The women found the process of prioritizing their domestic duties useful on a number of levels; some said it was the first time they had ever thought seriously about their likes and dislikes or their ways of doing things at home; others reported that they never thought about their

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<sup>7</sup>From a pedagogical perspective, I was interested in how the paras read informational material. Some of the women said they discarded the pamphlet immediately because the introduction addressed readers as if they were children. Others read it as a "rule" book for working-mothers and became frustrated because they couldn't implement all of the instructions.

option to choose some suggestions and discard others based on their specific personal needs; and a few admitted that the "tone" of the introduction "turned them off" to some useful information that followed. Once they were able to gather information about their priorities and feel secure in their right to make choices, the paras were ready to put the pamphlet into perspective, using it as resource, rather than dismissing it as a tool of some outside authority. They no longer felt threatened by the condescending authorities speaking at them from the pamphlet.

At this point, our time ran out. However, this small episode is one concrete indication of "empowerment" through critical reflection. They overcame their sense of insult and dis-empowerment to face, and even use the official pamphlet. In addition, the process of defining their domestic roles in terms of its marginal status in our culture encouraged the women to acknowledge their complex relationship to homemaking.

In my teaching journal reflecting on this session, I specifically noted Gloria's perspective on "Keeping a Home" as a complex interpretation of working-class values. Mindful of my own feelings of attachment to "material possessions" that have "symbolic meaning," I was impressed by the womens' capacity to question Gloria's perspective:

Although I agreed with Gloria (that doing housework is more than wiping the dust off the coffee table), I restrained my impulse to speak about the real value of domestic work (which is marginalized, even made invisible in our culture). This was a good pedagogical choice as it allowed the women, themselves, to shed light on other points of view. It seems that for women (like me and Gloria) who have valued possessions at home and memories of how they were acquired, keeping a home is a value. Yet, Angelica's comment brought me back to the economic issues which separate us even as all of the women in the room (myself included) claim membership in the same social class. I was happy to have the awful pamphlet as the locus of this "problem" on a male author who outlined a specific set of criteria for working-women with respect to doing housework because I was at a loss (after hearing so many diverse opinions) to take a firm position in this debate. Although I don't foresee an absolute set of values emerging on this issue, the paras' narratives and the follow-up discussion uncovered a sense of "empowerment" among the paras that I hope will be sustained in the coming weeks.

## Doing it All in Working-Class Culture

Despite this small episode of critical development at their first narrative session, the narratives they composed at the second session on October 28th made it increasingly clear that my high expectations for reflection and textual literacy had placed college in direct conflict with the paras primary identities as wives and mothers. Moving beyond a discussion of household chores, the women addressed the issue of conflicts between their domestic duties at home and the increasing academic demands they encountered in the composition class. As Janice wrote in a narrative entitled "Conflicts with Campus Life":

The worst aspect of this course is the endless stream of drafts and revisions. I'm used to a mid-term and a final exam. I study for a week, I take the test, and that's that. Now, I'm writing and revising every single weekend. My family is fed up with me and I can't even justify all of this extra school work because I'm not getting a pay raise for being here. When my husband used to complain about school, it felt good to shove my "higher" paycheck in his face every now and then. But now, I don't want school to cause

any further conflict, so I just try to write before class or when no one is home.

The last line of this journal provoked an immediate response from the paras, who asked in unison, "When is no one home?" During our discussion of this narrative, I asked Janice what she resented most about her situation, revising her drafts, not getting a pay raise for being in the writing class, or living in a domestic setting that allowed her so little time for school work? She backed away from the painful implications of this question by saying that she had "gone off the topic" emphasizing her financial and family conflicts in a journal on student life.<sup>8</sup> I replied that financial and family conflicts affect a student's college experience and are appropriate in a narrative on student life. Still, she did not want to go through the door she, herself, had opened and on to some uncomfortable issues obviously on her mind. However, I noted aloud in class that the connections among her multiple roles needed to be revised along with revising her papers. I was referring to the idea that critical reflection revises perception (ways

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<sup>8</sup>One of the most interesting debates to emerge in classroom discussion of these accounts of everyday life concerned "transgressing the boundaries" among their multiple roles, bringing the womens' attention to what Mary Soliday calls the "meeting and clashing of identities that literacy narratives bring to light" (512).

of knowing), not just writing (habits of encoding). Consequently, I said that the study strategies and pay incentives of the past no longer applied to her situation and that more appropriate strategies and incentives needed to be created. This comment was met with a great deal of collective skepticism by the paras who resented my advice to revise their life priorities. They ignored my challenge in their follow-up journals, responding instead, to what they perceived as Janice's need for more effective study techniques. For example, Stephanie offered a personal solution to the conflict between domestic duties and study time: she taped index cards to the splashboard above the kitchen sink, which reminded me of the way Celie in *The Color Purple* learned to read by pasting words on the kitchen walls. Stephanie wrote:

Last night I studied Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development while washing the dirty pots and pans. Eventually, I moved on to the clean pots and pans that I keep under the sink because I wasn't quite finished memorizing. The noise of the water running into the sink drowned out the sound of the portable T.V. on the counter next to the stove that my husband was watching and the noise of my kids fighting over the

last piece of cake at the kitchen table.

This journal generated lively response from paras who shared original and hilarious techniques on where and how moms could study, drowning out family life with transistor radios and ear plugs, using audio cassettes in the car while commuting, and taping oaktag paper inside the bathroom door (if only the paper were waterproof!). But the tone of the conversation grew more serious when other women pointed out that these suggestions failed to solve the problem for the composition class, where and how moms could find the peace and quiet they needed at home to accomplish the kinds of reading, writing, and reflecting that the composition class demanded -- activities which placed the process of education in direct conflict with their domestic roles.<sup>9</sup>

However, other women in the room were eager to share more positive narratives that offered a number of perspectives on the advantages at home as a result of their roles as working-mothers and college students. On the one hand, twenty out of the twenty-five women who still had school-aged children reported their kids showed improved grades and a new interest in "mom" as someone who

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<sup>9</sup>This conflict will be discussed in detail later as it emerged as a generative theme for the class in the paras' journals on the growing need for solitude in their academic lives..

metamorphosed into what they called, "a real person with a real life." As women restricted to domestic duties, the paras were cut-off from the public world where they could experience all their civic and intellectual talents. Thus, paid employment and the opportunity to go to college represent the opening to a public role for these women -- and the vast majority recognized this important advantage in their narratives. For example, in a journal entitled "Becoming More Than Mom," Svetlana reported on her youngest son's essay about "Mothers in the Job Market" in which he remarked that his working mother became more interesting and knowledgeable about "real life" than she was when she was just a "mom." Svetlana went on to describe the specific benefits she enjoyed via her employment in the field of education, particularly, her "insider" knowledge of the school system:

Being a working-mother is much easier when the workplace is a classroom because the work keeps me connected to my children and informed about their daily school experiences ...It's also not so easy to pull the wool over my eyes when it comes to homework and school regulations.

Other women wrote accounts of learning how to be a better parent to their own children through daily contact and communication with children from many different backgrounds and family situations. Joan expressed this common perspective well in a narrative entitled "Other People's Children":

Being a para focused my attention on other people's parenting problems in a way that helped me to solve my own. Once you see everyday conflicts from a lot of different perspectives you begin to re-evaluate your own habits as a mother...You learn to separate what's really important from what's just a trivial event in your child's life...That makes you a better parent.

In their verbal responses to Joan's journal, nine out of ten women in the room agreed that their working lives in the school system enhanced the quality of parenting they offered to their own children in some significant way. In addition, they said that their roles as child-care workers made their re-entry into the paid workforce less stressful for the family. These positive elements characterize the complex nature of the paras' experience. There is no simple answer or one-dimensional understanding here. Critical reflection

as a pedagogical method re-presents their own experience to them as problems for their complex analysis, unlike the childish simplicity of the official pamphlet "educating" them on how to be "working moms."

However, after these positive assessments of working in the school system were read, Joan and Valerie wanted to read the written follow-up narratives they had written in response to Janice's account of conflict and Stephanie's difficult solution (taping index cards to the splashboard). These follow-up journals brought the class back to the conflict surrounding the composition class -- which ushered in time consuming demands that eluded many of the coping strategies the women devised to excel in their vocational curriculum, complicating their perception of how they maintain the status quo at home. Joan's conflicted response entitled "Doing Homework and Housework No More," explained how she and her oldest daughter had become partners in a Saturday morning "memorization marathon" during her eight years in vocational class:

As Tara vacuumed, I quizzed her...As I mopped up, she quizzed me...Then we'd go out to basketball practice and lunch...it was our special time together.

One of the most significant conflicts Joan raised in this narrative was her own internal struggle over whether or not to continue this ritual (from which she no longer benefitted):

Studying for exams allowed for "time spent together," while composing requires "time spent alone"...It makes me selfish...I feel guilty when I'm selfish, like I let my family down...But, I also feel guilty when I don't perform as well as I can at school, like I've let myself down.

Socialized to help others first and put self last, Joan articulated a typical woman's conflict under patriarchy. Joan's emerging need for what she called "time spent alone" broadens the meaning of "A Room of One's Own" into cultural and class conflicts, spilling beyond gender, physical space, and privacy.

Valerie's response revealed that she had a "makeshift office" in the basement, but found it difficult to "go down there" while the rest of the family was engaged in some mutual activity (a conflict she expressed as "feeling left out") which illuminates a dissonance between home culture

and academic life that the paras share with "Scholarship Girls." For instance, Linda Brodkey reported that becoming an intellectual required a tolerance for isolation and loneliness -- admitting she "exchanged her working-class family in the kitchen for the books that now keep [her] company in her office" ("Writing on the Bias," 537). The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* identified a similar conflict in their subjects which they called "the budding subjectivist's impetus toward change, redefinition, and application of new ways of knowing and learning" (79). From this developmental perspective, what Joan called "being selfish," what Valerie experienced as "feeling left out," and what Brodkey called "isolation," Belenky, et.al. defined as "the need to forge new rules and boundaries in relationships" (79).

However, unlike Linda Brodkey, who expressed her conflict in terms of "isolation" and "loneliness," Joan and Valerie wrote narratives that addressed their conflict with "time spent away" (from the family). For example, Valerie, who said she felt torn "between the need to be alone and the stress of being away" explained this special conflict for mothers in a narrative entitled "My Subterranean Space":

I sneak away to the basement to study and write feeling

like I'm stealing time -- I'm stealing from them (my family), but I'm also stealing from me (mom).

Sometimes, when I hear them playing basketball in the backyard on Saturday. I want to go out there, but, I'm stuck in the basement (writing).... Then, I finally get into the writing and I don't hear them anymore, I'm rolling along and next thing I know, I hear my husband holler, "Hey, Val, are you ever coming out of there?" The spell is broken and I run into the yard, angry with him for interrupting me and angry with myself for letting him.

In a discussion of this narrative I asked Valerie, "How does doing school work while your husband and children are playing in the backyard translate into stealing time?" She explained that she defined stolen time as "time that I'm home, but not available to them":

I always saw my "time away" from my family as the time I spent working outside the home... helping out (financially), but I think of the time I'm at home as 'their' time...Now, I need "time away" even when I'm home.

Some of the women disagreed with Valerie, pointing out that cooking, cleaning, talking on the phone (and lots of other distractions) limit the time mothers spend with children. In particular Stephanie raised objection to what she called Valerie's "self-inflicted guilt trip," when she said, "I have no problem chasing everyone out of the kitchen when I'm cooking for them or taking a phone call for myself, so, why should I have a problem with studying?" Only three or four women shared Stephanie's attitude. For example, Joan said, "I used to go bowling or to PTA meetings at night, now I go to school." However, the vast majority felt that school work represented a different type of time away (serving self vs. serving others). They articulated this difference as not merely a physical absence, but a real departure from the familiar rhythms of everyday life which was more negatively interpreted by other family members and provoked more guilt and frustration than other more routine departures. Specifically, Angelica spoke for many when she pointed out how relatives (husbands, grandparents, aunts, uncles) felt that they had to fill-in the "weekend and evening time gaps" that their college attendance and study created in family life. "The kids don't even ask me to do things anymore," she said, "their father picks them up on Saturday and they're glad to leave me alone with my books." At this

point, the question on the table became, "Why is spending a few hours of 'time away' studying, reading, or composing viewed differently from spending "time away" cooking, doing household chores, or going bowling?" Stephanie (who had been one of the few women to defend "time away" to study) re-interpreted her position in the light of the questions being raised in the discussion and characterized the conflict with "time away" from the perspective of family members as follows:

Family members understand doing chores or the need for some leisure time, but they don't view school work in quite the same way because it's not a familiar [or accepted] activity for women. Also, when you cook a meal, clean the garage, or even go out bowling, you share the results of your experience with the family. It's a topic of conversation, almost as if they were with you. For example, when I used to spend an hour at the PTA, I'd come home and tell Gary who I saw, what news I heard, what was said at the meeting, by whom, etc. So we shared this kind of time away. On the other hand, when I spend an hour writing a paper or studying for an exam, there's nothing to talk about, he wouldn't know what I was talking about anyway. So, it's

different....

Thus, for the paras, time spent alone with their books is not experienced as something that enhances family life or conversation, like time spent alone cooking, cleaning, or going out with friends. Rather, it was most often expressed during our discussion as solitary confinement -- a price they must pay to be successful in college. In addition, Janice pointed to a more complex challenge that the writing class presents when she read the final passage in her follow-up narrative:

Time alone with a blank page is even more tormenting than time alone with a text book, because with a textbook, you study until you learn the material... With writing, you never know how much time it will take, and you have no way of knowing if you did it right. So, a lot of time alone with writing does not always pay off with a good result.

This response to intellectual work supports the findings of Belenky et.al. who reported that many of the women college students they interviewed experienced dissonance between the concrete and practical aspects of school or what their

subjects experienced as "the difference between getting something down pat" and "guesswork" (42). They described a typical woman college student they interviewed as follows:

She learns the material; that is, stores a copy of it, first in her notes and then in her head...she files it as is.... She willingly reproduces the material on demand, as on an exam (42).

The authors conclude that such women can become "richly endowed repositories of information," and may be "quite successful in schools that don't demand a reflective, relativistic stance" (43). But they go on to say, "If this way of knowing is not rapidly dislodged the student is likely either to drop out or to be pushed out early in the game" (43). The time alone with the "blank page" that emerged in Janice's journal refers to just this type of transition and illustrates the paras' resistance to investing an indeterminate amount of time on intellectual work where they have to serve their own development not their families and look inside themselves for the source of "knowledge."

That night, the first part of my teaching journal listed all of the evidence which confirmed my first

impression of the paras as *silent facilitators*:

...Janice writes that her family is fed up with her, Stephanie is washing pots and pans hoping no one will notice that she is doing something for herself [studying] even as she is doing something for her family [cleaning up after them], Joan is trying to do housework while she helps her daughter study and feels guilty because she has no time to write, Valerie even feels guilty when her family is having a good time in the backyard while she studies. These women truly are *silent facilitators*. Even Valerie, who expressed the most resentment in her narrative admitted that she did not voice her objections to her husband, but just joined in the basketball game (keeping her feelings to herself). However, what interests me most about Valerie's narrative is the subtle hint that she started to "forget" her family was "out there" and momentarily "got lost" in her own interest. Of all the narratives shared today, Valerie's was the single example of an emergent "self" -- she got angry, not only at herself, but at her husband for interrupting her. From another perspective, I wonder how much Valerie's "rolling along with her paper" vs. the "blank page" which emerged in

Janice's narrative contributed to their different responses to the conflicts between domestic life and school work?

"When is No One Home?":  
Still Needing a Room of Their Own

Coming back to my journal later that evening, I wrote a few more passages on the paras' need for a room of their own (as I, at the time, had just been granted one after eight years of college).

...In retrospect, it is hard to imagine how I managed to move through four years of college and four years of graduate course work and comprehensive exams without much solitude or privacy, but like the paras, the crowded and noisy environment of the working-class household was the only kind of family life I had ever known...

The lack of quiet and privacy in the working-class household, so prominent in the paras narratives (and in my own student life) is also mentioned in published literacy

narratives. Linda Brodkey reported that she learned how to read, "In the social space of the kitchen" (536). Richard Rodriguez, armed with a flashlight, secreted himself, "In a closet, or under a bed with a book" (45). But unlike Brodkey and Rodriguez who created space for themselves as children amidst the cramped quarters and chaos of the working-class household (later moving on to the private spaces of university dormitories and libraries), the adult paras do college "homework" in a domestic setting that permits no rendezvous with books for them -- not in the kitchen, or in the closets, or under the beds. Can you imagine "mom" hiding under the bed with a book and a flashlight?

I did, however, confess to the paras that when I was in college I had done my reading with a flashlight, not under the bed, but in bed (under the covers), they said that there were more interesting things to do under the covers and implied that my marriage must be pretty boring if I brought my school books to bed. I assured them that my marriage wasn't boring, and reported that the flashlight strategy had worked quite well, indeed, eventually prompting my husband to furnish a well-lighted and spacious office for me to do my school work (if for no better reason than to get my school books out of our bed).

Looking back on this exchange with the paras, I am not surprised by their response -- a room of their own might have been seen as a luxury during their long-term vocational program. Their narratives show that they had thus far found effective means to cope with the lack of quiet and privacy. Their assimilation into a particular type of campus life not only socialized them (and their families) into a particular view of higher education (as a means to absorb job related information while they increased their incomes), but also indoctrinated them into a particular set of study strategies that served them well in the vocational curriculum. It is only now (in freshman composition) that the lack of quiet and privacy is felt more acutely. Will they get a room of their own? Probably not before they get a B.A. So, if they are going to be successful in college (as I was), they will follow a model of separation and assimilation that is different from that of the "Scholarship Boys and Girls." They will begin to stay up nights -- stealing more and more from their sleep and searching for corners of quiet and peace under the covers -- and, yes, they will have to buy flashlights.

"What Do You See in Your Books?":  
The Role of School in Working-Class Culture

If the paras are to succeed in college, they will also be required to confront and ultimately reject their early socialization in working-class schooling. Among the many who have written about working-class experience in schooling, Jean Anyon explains in "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work" how education makes available different and unequal curricula to students from different social classes. Anyon observed five elementary schools over an academic year and concluded that fifth-graders of different economic backgrounds are already being prepared to occupy particular rungs on the social ladder. Specifically, she noted that in working-class schools:

Work is following the steps of a procedure...usually mechanical, involving rote behavior and very little decision-making or choice. The teachers rarely explain why the work is being assigned, how it might connect to other assignments, or what the idea is that lies behind the procedure or gives it coherence and perhaps meaning or significance (527).

Anyon's findings were confirmed by Jeannie Oakes in *Keeping*

*Track.* In an analysis of the tracking system, which studied three areas of school experience (classroom climate, distribution of knowledge, and opportunities to learn), Oakes observed:

Everywhere we turn we see the likelihood of in-school barriers to upward mobility for capable poor and minority students. The measures of talent<sup>10</sup> seem clearly to work against them, resulting in their placement in groups identified as slow. Once there, their achievement seems to be further inhibited by the type of knowledge they are exposed to and the quality of learning opportunities they are afforded (134).

During our third narrative session on November 11th, the women took up this issue of working-class schooling and orientation to higher education. Their retrospective narratives on "life in school" further illuminated their conflicts with intellectual work and solitude -- bringing the powerful influence of their early school experiences to

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<sup>10</sup>The "measures of talent" to which Oakes refers include various forms of standardized testing which privilege, at the outset, the types of knowledge and language patterns that middle-class students bring to school. It was just this type of testing (specifically, the "Cooperative Examinations" administered by the Catholic Archdiocese of N.Y.) that consigned Victor Villanueva, an "A" student from a minority working-class background, to a vocational/technical high school.

light. The three narratives discussed below (which are representative of the accounts read at this session), not only confirm the paras' confinement to the tracked education described by Anyon and Oakes, but also clearly illustrate the long-term consequences of exposure to unequal schooling which developed them into college students who resist questioning the status quo and accept vocational training as the norm in higher education. In addition, these accounts of early experience with working-class schooling also show that the paras' low vocational aspirations are inscribed in the attitudes, folkways, and material conditions they bring to school from their home cultures.

One of the most striking examples of the ways in which the paras' marginal status on the college campus reproduced their early school experiences was poignantly articulated by Monique in a narrative entitled "Is There Life After School?"

Coming to college in my thirties brought me back to a place I escaped from at sixteen. I left high school after my 10th grade advisor told my parents I was not "college material." After that, I found out there is life after school, but it was not the kind of life I wanted. Through the para program I got a chance to

finally come to college. But, last term, after six years at Kingsborough, one of my professors said to me, "Not all paras have the intellectual capacity to become teachers." Now, I ask myself, "What kind of life will there be for me after so many years in college?"

In a discussion of this passage, I asked Monique to explain how her grade advisor's comments caused her to leave high school at sixteen -- a rather drastic response to a single negative assessment of her academic potential, I thought. The attitudes she had learned in her home culture became evident when she said that the advisor's statement merely reinforced what her family had heard year after year when her elementary school teachers in her native Haiti consistently placed her in the "slow class." Although she claimed her parents were very unhappy with her curriculum placement, she admitted:

They never questioned my teachers' opinions or asked for special help for me, because they didn't believe complaining or asking for help would do any good (in Haiti school teachers are status symbols in the community and parents do not challenge them). Since college was out of the question, and my family needed

money after coming to this country, my father told me to "quit school and get a job."

Nine out of ten paras in the room reported similar experiences with negative assessments from elementary school professionals that resulted in pejorative tracking (similar to the fate reported by Mike Rose when he was assigned to vocational education in high school, a designation neither he nor his working-class parents understood). For example, Maria, a thirty-one-year-old Hispanic mother of two affirmed Monique's experience in a narrative entitled "A Nurse (Maybe), A Doctor (Never)":

I wanted to be a doctor ever since I can remember. Even though I didn't do particularly well in math and science in the early grades, I kept telling everyone that I was going to be a doctor, and my parents believed in me -- that is, until my third grade teacher, Miss Wolff, told my mother that with an I.Q. score of 105 (which is only average) and test scores that placed me in the "middle class" at school, I could never get into medical school. She suggested that my parents help me to set my sights on a more realistic career, such as nursing. I really hated Miss Wolff for

saying that because, from that point on, my parents lost interest in my school progress, and by the time I started junior high, so did I.

These two accounts of working-class schooling written by Monique and Maria are representative of most narratives written by women in the class that day<sup>11</sup> and illustrate one way that schooling disciplines working-class students into low aspirations consistent with the low economic position designated for their class. As Mike Rose remembers from his own placement on the vocational track:

Neither I nor my parents realized what this meant. We had no sense that business math, typing, and English (level D) were dead ends. The current spate of reports on the schools criticizes parents for not involving themselves in the education of their children. But how would someone like Tommy Rose, with his two years of Italian schooling, know what to ask? And what sort of pressure could an exhausted waitress apply? The error went undetected, and I remained on the vocational track for two years (24).

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<sup>11</sup>Of the twenty-six women present, only three (Stephanie, Janice, and Michelina) reported that they were placed on the "fast" track in elementary school.

Like Rose, the paras grew up in families where parents had little or no formal education, worked long hours, and relied on the school professionals to make decisions for their children. Even the three women (Stephanie, Janice, and Michelina) who said they were placed on the "fast track," had to work against their socialization into low expectations. These women composed narratives on schooling that highlighted the "mixed messages" they received both from teachers and parents. For one thing, their accounts revealed that they learned early from teachers that their academic success was "relative," not sufficient to gain access to the elite track of "higher education." For example, Michelina, a thirty-nine-year-old Hispanic mother of four who attended Catholic elementary school in Redhook, Brooklyn recalled a nun telling her eighth grade class (the "honors group") "Outside Redhook, you people would be in the "slow" class. You're not the 'cream of the crop,' so don't start thinking you're anything special." Nevertheless, Michelina said that being in the "honors group" gave her access to an all-girls Catholic high school with a solid academic program. In her narrative entitled "Both Sides of the Track," she rendered an account of conflict between "books and boys" that emerged during her adolescence in patriarchal working-class Latino culture:

Because I got better grades than my older brothers in Catholic elementary school, I was accepted to an all-girls Catholic high school, which pleased my father. He wanted me there for safety from "the boys" who might put their eyes or their hands on me in the local public high school my brothers attended.<sup>12</sup> But, he took me out of that all-girls school in the middle of my junior year after I came home with applications for college scholarships. He said, "No girl should be smarter than her brothers -- or her husband."

Although Michelina's class position is clearly complicated by ethnic patriarchy, she also gave an interesting account of her younger brother, Luis, whose story highlights the significance of *class* in her family's perspective on education. It seems that Luis also encountered a "mixed message" from the family when he began to spend more time alone with his school books. Although they were proud of his scholastic accomplishments, his father and older brothers constantly teased him about his lack of interest in

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<sup>12</sup>The parental decision to enroll adolescent girls in gender-segregated parochial school as a means to protect them from working-class males was reported by other women in the class. Some attributed their graduation from high school to the all-girl setting (lack of distraction), others said their female teachers provided strong role models. However, an equal number complained that the vocational curriculum (mostly secretarial training) excluded them from college-prep courses and consigned them to the lower strata of the workforce. .

sports and girls (which reminded me of the scenario rendered by Richard Rodriguez in *Hunger for Memory*).

Scholarship Boys and Girls:  
Remembering Working Class Schooling

Although the paras' school experiences are complicated by age and gender, they are not atypical of working-class education. Undemocratic tracking, negative teacher assessments, and negative class-based attitudes typify many school experiences for working-class students, one that is frequently mentioned in the literacy narratives of those who became in Hoggart's words "Scholarship Boys [and Girls]." For example, in a retrospective view of his encounter with the "tracking system," Mike Rose remembers "seeing a handful of students excel in courses that sounded exotic and that are only in the curriculum of the elite" (28). Victor Villanueva, a minority student from a working-class background was denied a place in the college prep high school due to "poor scores on standardized tests." He recalls in the summer of 1962 that his parents watched with pride as he walked up the altar steps of All Saints School in his cap and gown to receive special recognition..." (13). But, doing well did not get him to the elite high school. He writes:

So what happened? I was an "A" student, third or fourth in the class, able with language...the Merriam-Webster spelling bee champ that year...Jerry Engells went to Catholic college prep high school...I went to Alexander Hamilton Vocational-Technical High School (22).

Villanueva describes his eighth grade graduation as, "The day that [I] figured out that doing well in school hadn't paid off...It was the day Dad became smarter too, not to be dismissed as easily as mom...Dad would just say...[*Cuidao, Papi*] 'They try to keep us stupid'" (13).

The negative teacher assessments so subtly encoded in Villanueva's experience, are overtly manifested in M. Bella Mirabella's encounter with another working-class Catholic school. In "The Education of an Italian-American Girl Child," Mirabella remembers her elementary school as:

A terrible school in every way...an institution where I and my fellow students were tormented by poorly educated nuns and lay teachers who hated children...a place where daily humiliation and ridicule were the central pedagogy (165).

Mirabella poignantly renders the memory of receiving her fifth grade report card:

Amidst a small group of "miserable eleven -year-olds" forced to stand in front of the entire class trembling in our maroon and gray uniforms waiting for the horrific verdict to come down like a condemnation from on high..."Students," said the teacher, "Look at these people. They are examples of failure" (165).

Yet, another story of negative teacher attitudes toward working-class students is reported in "Bronx Syndrome," an essay by Stephen Garger who attended "A college in the upper reaches of the Bronx (N.Y.),...small and at best, mediocre" (45). Garger recalls:

A professor, (who, like many others resented having to teach working-class students), described in class the mission of the school as teaching the first generation of immigrant children how to eat with a knife and fork (46).

In retrospect, Garger admits:

We knew we were being insulted, but in order to get as far as college we had already learned that school was the one place in our experience where we couldn't get in somebody's face, specifically, the teacher's. So, we took it (46).

Like these high-achieving working-class academics, Stephanie, Janice, and Michelina (those paras who claimed to be high achieving students throughout their early schooling) encountered what Irvin Peckham called:

The exclusionary function of educational institutions that reproduce the existing social structure by screening out students from the working-class consequently reserving for the children of the professional and managerial classes the privileges that attend academic success (263).

Both Stephanie and Janice reported on high school guidance counselors who either did not tell them about pre-requisites for college or did not know how help them file the proper applications for college admissions. During her senior year at a parochial high school, Stephanie found out that she did not earn the right kind of credits in mathematics (she took

business math instead of the required algebra and geometry). Janice, who had followed a four-year academic curriculum at a public high school did not have good S.A.T.'s scores and was also rejected by the colleges to which she applied. Michelina, who received "honors" for three years of liberal arts education at a parochial high school was rejected by several colleges because her final year in the public school system prevented her from completing a four-year academic sequence in English. Because their working-class families did not really value college attendance and didn't know how to help them, these women said they felt frustrated and overwhelmed by rejection and gave up on college.

As time was running out, I asked Stephanie, Janice, and Michelina to summarize their experiences in retrospect. Stephanie captured their collective comments quite succinctly when she said:

Looking back, I see that other girls (whose grades were not as good as mine, but whose parents were school teachers or accountants with some college behind them), got help from the guidance counselors and gained admission to college.

Both Janice and Michelina agreed with Stephanie's

assessment, and added addendum that emphasized their own responsibility to gather the proper information, thus blaming themselves for not knowing what to do, instead of the system which failed to give them adequate guidance.

My teaching journal enumerated some of the similarities and differences between the experiences of these women and the "Scholarship Boys and Girls" I was reading about in my graduate seminar:

...The womens' stories are not unlike those told by Victor Villanueva or Mike Rose, in that these "Scholarship Boys" could have ended up like the paras. Rose was lucky someone noticed that he was misplaced. Villanueva had to fight his way through the community college system (with little encouragement from his professors). It seems to me that the "Scholarship Boys and Girls" just beat the odds. But, unlike these few working-class students (all of whom eventually earned advanced degrees), the paras in my classes were not among the few who "beat the odds" by gaining access to a university education as young adults. Instead, after many years away from school, they find themselves back on the same working-class treadmill in higher education

- vocational training. Overall, their retrospective narratives on schooling show that they experience college as primarily skills-based, and they accept their position at the huge bottom of the university system as a consequence of their own intellectual inadequacies. Put simply, they don't refer to patriarchy, racism, or class-bias to account for their position in society. Put another way, they don't see "The personal as the political." One of the most important questions this narrative session raises (for me) is my suspicion that gaining access to education is the only way one sees clearly the inequities and certainly the only way one can do anything to challenge them.

#### They Don't Pay Me to Have Opinions

At the fourth narrative session on November 25th, the women addressed their roles in the school workplace. Besides reproducing the paras' childhood experiences with mass schooling, the familiar limits of their vocational classes reflect the learning environment at their school job sites. For the most part, the womens' narratives on "work" indicate that the limits they impose upon themselves in college are

reinforced by the limits imposed on them in their work environment. Of the twenty-four women present that day, twenty reported that they feel like "babysitters" at their job sites, little more than custodial guardians for small groups of children labeled by the school system as "troublemakers." The first two texts that were read, though, provoked disagreements among the women even though they provided detailed and interesting reports that illuminate the social function of paras as facilitators of a dysfunctional "status quo" in the school system.

The first, a particularly revealing narrative on how paras function as agents of social control in the classroom was written by Monique. In a contrastive journal entry entitled, "Two Systems, One Result," Monique compared her childhood experience in the Haitian schools of the 1950's and 60's to her observations of children in New York City public schools in the 1980's and 90's, and concluded that the two different settings result in the same educational outcome for many students:

When I was a small child in Haiti during the 1950's, we were a class of sixty grammar school pupils with a single School Master standing at the front of the room. We were to keep our seats and remain silent unless

called upon to recite our lessons. (We kept our seats and our silence from seven-thirty a.m. to four-thirty p.m. six days a week with the exception of one half-hour "yard time" at mid-day when we took our lunch. Comments from the School Master were always negative, as correct answers were expected. Since there was no "tracking" and no "social promotion," bigger children who could no longer fit into the tiny desks sat on the floor. At twelve-years, those who did not master the material were expelled and sent to work as laborers. We studied at our own pace, and when we finished one task, we went on to another. We were never to be without a book in our hands....

Coney Island, Brooklyn, in the 1990's is another story. I work with a second-grade class with twenty-seven children, two paras, and a teacher. The children in every class are evenly divided into three sub-groups according to ability. Helen and I alternate between helping the slow group and keeping the fast group in line. The children working at grade level get most of the teacher's attention because the lessons are most appropriate for them...In the slow group, I correct work on a one to one basis (that means one child working with me while eight others wait on line). In

the fast group, I baby-sit. To make sure that no one goes ahead with the reading or does homework in class, I am supposed to collect their readers and notebooks. "Just keep the children busy, quiet, and standing in a straight line," the teacher says. A very different type of education from my own? Not really. In Haiti, at least a third of the pupils were expelled, in the New York City public schools at least a third of the pupils drop out or receive a useless vocational diploma -- that is, consumer math instead of algebra, no foreign language, and "dummy" English, leaving them unprepared for college level classes and on the non-credit track in college.

Monique's critique of the "American" school system fascinated me because it illustrated how the "status quo" creates working-class schooling dividing the students into groups that go nowhere intellectually. Linda Brodkey's educational experience (also in the 1950's and 60's), confirms Monique's assessment. In "Writing on the Bias," she recalls that her habit of "reading ahead" concerned her first grade teacher so much that she [the teacher] "taped the unread portion of the book closed to prevent [Linda] from reading ahead" (536). Thus, school restricted

Brodkey's natural intellectual growth. Although first grade teachers are no longer taping books shut, the system relies on the paras to discourage solitary reading by collecting the books. Indeed, Monique's narrative also brought back to mind my own experience as a child in the over-crowded working-class schools of New York in the 1950's and 60's; I remember waiting on long lines -- to have my homework checked, to receive supplies, to use the bathroom. Looking back, I'm sure I spent more time waiting in line than on any other classroom activity. So, it seems that whether teachers or paras are called upon to execute such mind-numbing administrative practices, control and restriction remain the constants of mass education.

However, even though I thought the differences and similarities Monique noted between two elementary school settings were informative and interesting, the paras found her comparisons infuriating, particularly because she failed to address the hidden role of the schools in Haiti, providing a steady flow of "menial child labor" for the Haitian economy. I had to concede that twelve-year-olds are not banished from our school system and pressed into child labor, but nevertheless, I agreed with Monique that American schools also provide a steady flow of adult "menial labor" for the U.S. economy. (On the other hand, U.S. firms can

easily set up production in Haiti to take advantage of cheap child labor under easier conditions than stateside). In particular, the vast majority of women in the room pointed out that Monique also ignored the collective benefits derived from grouping children at similar levels of ability -- something they saw as "missing" from the model in Haiti which left many children hopelessly behind and unable to "catch-up" at a very early age, and consequently consigned them to menial labor at twelve. Overall, all but two (Monique and Angelica) argued that tracking is necessary in a system that serves hundreds of thousands of children each year. Joan, [the former bus driver] spoke first, posing this question to the class:

Have you ever been on mass transit when the conductor announces that the train you are riding on is bypassing stations or being held in the station due to scheduling problems or mechanical failures? If you are on that train, you might be inconvenienced, however, the majority of riders (those not on that particular train) will be better served. Well, the educational system works the same way. A few children may be misplaced, but the majority benefit from being assigned to the most appropriate learning environment.

Several members of the class, most of whom originally supported the concept of tracking, strongly objected to Joan's comparison of being "temporarily delayed" by the mass transit system to being "permanently disadvantaged" in the "dead-end curriculum" of the school system. But, while I found it disturbing that Joan thought of tracking as a "temporary delay" for the few, rather than a pervasive barrier to upward mobility for the many, the women saw the "terms" used in schools to identify and place children in specific curriculums (which they claimed were outdated and culturally biased) as the locus of the problem. Our debate over the existence of those classifications vs. the accuracy with which they are deployed led to some disagreements over the meaning of specific "terms," and ultimately prompted me to suggest a contrastive journal in which the paras would "translate" into Standard English the technical language they use to discuss the placement of children in specific curriculums.

Only two women (Monique and Angelica) volunteered to read their journals (which confirmed their limited understanding of the specialized language they employed on a daily basis at their job sites). Monique's journal, "Reading with Randy," began with the official classifications used by The Board of Education to indicate

the childrens' levels of ability, but ended with specific arguments for adjusting these classifications to suit the needs of this particular child named Randy with whom Monique was familiar. Her narrative briefly outlined a series of classifications used to place children with Down's Syndrome into main-stream classes. Then, she noted that one of the third grade boys she works with in Special Education classes should be mainstreamed because he accomplishes specific reading tasks faster and more accurately than some "normal" third graders. "Although Randy cannot grasp mathematical concepts at all," Monique wrote, "he reads above average, and since most school subjects are based on reading ability (not skill with numbers) he should be mainstreamed." I asked the class to comment on this case. All twenty-two women who said they were in favor of tracking as a "necessary" strategy in the schools said they agreed with Monique that an exception should be made in this case (by adjusting the classification for this particular student). I asked the women if there were many other students like Randy who did not fit the categories. Everyone said they personally knew at least one or two students like Randy, and at least half the women agreed that too many children were mis-placed in the current system. However, no one could explain how the cognitive abilities of children correlated

to specific official classifications, or even how the children in one category differed from those in another.

The second volunteer, Angelica, (one of only two women in the class to originally condemn the tracking system) wrote a narrative entitled "Tracking is Legal Discrimination" in which she discussed some of the bi-lingual students at her job site who are mistakenly placed in Special Education due to their difficulties with English.

I know two second-grade Hispanic students (Victor and Inez) and three Haitians (Ricky, Jean, and Maressa) who are in special ed. because of difficulties with reading. They know how to read the words, but they don't know the meaning of the words they read [in English], so they are mis-placed.

I asked Angelica to explain how reading comprehension is tested in the case of bi-lingual students at her job sites. For example, I wanted to know if they are tested in their native language, if they are re-tested periodically, etc. She said that she didn't know how students get placed in various categories or how the children in one group differ from those in another. Her major problem with the testing system itself was that large numbers of non-English speaking

students were relegated to "special ed. classes." Although nine out of ten women in the room agreed that bi-lingual students make up a substantial proportion of special ed. students, no one could explain the criteria for placement in special ed. Thus, their access to the technical terms used by professional educators at their school job sites did not help the paras interpret the meaning behind those terms or to question how official discourse is used to facilitate the status quo in school administration. As Peter Elbow points out in "Reflections on Academic Discourse,":

When students write about something only in the language of the textbook or the discipline, they often distance or insulate themselves from experiencing or really internalizing the concepts they are allegedly learning (137).

Official language similarly limited the paras approach to "tracking." Perhaps at this point I should have assigned an essay by Oakes on tracking or Burton Clark's famous study, "The Cooling-Out Function in Higher Education," for background on the conscious use of class-based tracking in mass higher education. However, the paras' attention was now clearly focused on the two contrastive narratives under

discussion which revealed a dissonance between them and the official discourse of their work and also suggested the subordination of political issues (technical classification obscuring sociological observation). Thus, I took up this dissonance between the negative labeling of students they encountered everyday at their school worksites and their own more favorable observations of those same children. Using their writings to provoke deeper inquiry, I asked the women to consider other questions for the class to investigate, such as, "How are curriculums designed and appropriated? By Whom? What are the benefits/disadvantages of these classifications -- for the institution and for the children? Do the categories and definitions themselves shape the teacher's expectations about the potential of individual students? If so, how?"

Unfortunately, without exception, the women's responses focused on common sense or normative explanations of school curriculum, defending the current "tracking" system as the only "rational" solution to educating millions of children with varying degrees of ability and disability. However, a few also offered alternative suggestions. For example, Stephanie wrote about a segment on public television that featured schools in some mid-western states experimenting with more flexible grade levels. She explained that this

concept involves integrating children at three grade levels, instead of promoting or retaining children every year. In this type of open grade-level assignment, third, fourth, and fifth graders are simultaneously exposed to a larger group of children and a wider curriculum where they could develop their individual cognitive skills at their own pace without lagging behind and falling through the cracks in a single school year. However, Stephanie's suggestion was subsumed in a narrative that stressed the unlikelihood of such innovations, and acknowledged the absurdity of the idea that paraprofessionals would be able to generate a dialogue about curriculum design at their school sites. She ended this journal with the statement:

As a para, I can only hope that teachers or administrators might watch this kind of program and develop some alternative curriculums for the kids in N.Y.C. public schools.

As our time was running out, I asked if anyone wanted to have the last word on para experience at the job site. Joan summarized it best when she read an interesting and detailed account of more open curriculums which ended with the phrase, "As paras, we facilitate, we don't initiate." Once

it became obvious that all of the women agreed with Joan's assessment of para functions, I asked them to explain this apt job description (facilitator) more concretely (in terms of a specific task). The job category "communication facilitator" emerged as a primary example and the women explained how they are trained in this (new and controversial) technique designed to assist autistic children.

We're the ones who learn how to do it, they said, but other people (who don't know how to do it) evaluate its success...They never ask us whether or not we believe in what we're facilitating and the decision to continue or discontinue for any child is made without our input.

The question then on the table became "how would paras gain the power to initiate and what political project does this pose for them as educators?" Most agreed that getting out of "para land" and into the professional arena (as teachers) was more important than "trying to change the system from the bottom up." They felt barely able to change their personal lives, let alone the world.

My teaching journal that evening was informed by my mid-

semester conferences with each para. These conversations proved helpful to my pedagogy (and to my morale) because I saw how effectively the women critiqued their narratives, not just in terms of the issues they addressed, but also with regard to their own writing process. I wrote:

Despite collective apathy about their potential to initiate change or even participate in decision-making at their job sites, the womens' journals (and the critical discussions which followed) sparked an awareness of their own powers of observation and their capacity to engage in philosophical debate (among themselves) on issues in the field of education. Although two-thirds of them reported at our mid-term student-teacher conference that their journals on work were the least coherent (both in terms of organization and development of ideas), more than half of those said they felt compelled to contribute to the discussion of job-related issues because they had never been offered a chance to discuss their own opinions about administrative practices in school even though they spent a great deal of time in college learning about them. Clearly, they are the class which takes orders and follows policies from others. They have not been

oriented to activist knowledge-making or to active participation in work or politics. Yet, almost every woman I spoke with over these past two weeks of interviews has used these narratives on her job experiences as material for further writing on school curriculums, worker education, service learning, developmental theories of childhood, etc. These essays represent some of best analytical writing the women have produced in this class.

"It's Now or Never":  
Re-Thinking Higher Education

Although the womens' narratives on family and work clearly illustrated the subordination of their intellectual identities to the demands of their domestic and working lives, their narratives on higher education written during the final session on December 9th, suggested that many were beginning to embrace a "now or never" philosophy about the prospects of earning a college degree. In particular, Cassandra, Janice, and Svetlana (who volunteered to read from their journals during this session) wrote narratives that represented the connections between college attendance and specific conditions of everyday life. These narratives served to recast the womens' multiple roles in ways that

challenged their previous assumptions. For example, in a journal entitled "Getting Out of This Place," Cassandra wrote:

I've reached the point of no return in my desire to become educated, my daughters watch me struggle and they see a role model for reaching higher than cleaning other people's houses. For my sons, though, it's not so easy. I hope that they will eventually see [in education], an alternative to the gang violence in the streets.

Cassandra's narrative introduced another Freirian "generative theme" for the group -- fear of "external threats"<sup>13</sup> to the home. As Cassandra's narratives centered more closely on the dangerous streets near her public housing project, a number of other women in class broadened "fear of violence" to include events inside the home as an impediment to their college attendance.<sup>14</sup> Leaving children

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<sup>13</sup>The subject of "external threats" in the narratives of working-class women writers is explored by Linda Brodkey who reports on a study she set up ("Literacy Letters") in which teachers and working-class students corresponded. The working women wrote narratives about external threats, as opposed to the internal conflicts expressed in the narratives of middle-class women. She also found that when teachers avoided making reference to the scenes of violence in their replies, letters between the two became increasingly unsuccessful as communications.

<sup>14</sup>Richard Hoggart observed that the core of working-class life is a sense of "the personal, the concrete, and the local...embodied in the idea of first, the family, and second, the

home alone after school was a major stress factor for single mothers, while frequent and sometimes violent confrontations with spouses over college attendance was mentioned by others. The class took up this generative theme to shed light on the connections among domestic violence, teenage gangs, inadequate child-care, and dangerous streets. For example, some paras asked the extraordinary question, "Does a mother's decision to attend college cause or contribute to these family and community problems, or does exposure to higher education just make the threats posed by violent and unsafe conditions more visible?" To this sophisticated perception of the issue, most women in the class felt that both perspectives were implicated because as Stephanie put it, "Being away from the home and community separates you physically and your experiences while you are away separates your ways of thinking." I asked Stephanie to relate this statement to her own life so as to make her response more concrete. Her long, detailed explanation was summarized in two closing remarks: First, "In some ways physical separation from the neighborhood makes you care less what happens there because you have no time to do anything about it. Second, What you learn in college changes the way you

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neighborhood" (18). His findings are evident in the paras' narratives on family life which are the source of their most compelling, intense, and complex writing.

see the problems in the first place." Janice took up these ideas in a follow-up journal entitled "Moving Away" in which she noted:

Sociology classes offer such different explanations for everyday events...there are endless theories about gang violence, neighborhood crime, juvenile delinquency, and family dysfunction. These are things most people don't know or care about. But hearing about them at school makes you see how complex these problems are and discourages you from doing anything about them, especially since all of your time is taken up just learning about them. School takes up so much time that you don't have any left over to get involved. Finally, I can't imagine going to my block association with textbook theories on these issues -- they'd run me out of the room.

Although nine out of ten paras agreed that the dissonance between their home communities and campus culture discouraged them from "crossing the borders" between home, work, and school, a number of follow-up narratives focused on the positive aspects of working and going to college despite domestic and neighborhood obstacles. In fact, a few

women said they felt "more prepared" to face the challenges presented by their gendered/class position in the university because they had already successfully mediated between domestic and child-care duties and paid employment. And since critical discourse is spoken and understood on campus, there is no idiomatic dissonance between their speech and that of others at school as there would be should they venture to use it in everyday life. As Svetlana explained in a response narrative entitled "Being a Mature Student":

Coming to college at forty added one more fly to the ointment that is my life, but it was a small one -- more like an annoying little gnat as opposed to the gigantic horse fly I took on when I left my drug addicted husband and returned to work. As I see it, my life experience (working full time while raising two boys in a poverty neighborhood) prepared me for anything.

Although this comment was intended to project self-confidence and optimism, it also revealed the marginal status Svetlana assigns to her student identity. However, through acknowledging and questioning the words they used to describe and compare their roles, the women began to

interpret them from multiple perspectives. As one scholar of the literacy narratives, Mary Soliday, suggested:

When they are able to evaluate their experiences from an interpretive perspective, students achieve narrative agency by discovering that their experience is, in fact, interpretable (511).<sup>15</sup>

Although the paras' experiences are tied to a specific work/school situation, their autobiographical accounts of home, work, and campus life suggest tensions that broadly reflect their positions as non-traditional working-class women collegians. Juggling full-time jobs and family responsibilities, adult working women students lead lives of frantic commuting from home to work, to school, and back home again. In this stressful daily routine, campus life is sandwiched between an eight-hour work day and a return to domestic and child-care duties. The ways of speaking and knowing<sup>16</sup> they bring to class are different from those of

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<sup>15</sup>In "Translating Self and Difference Through Literacy Narratives" (1994), Mary Soliday considers the relevance of literacy narratives to writing pedagogy for non-traditional students. She says, "If writers construct their interpretations of past events from the vantage point of a particular present, the life story becomes a dialogical account of one's experience rather than a chronological report of verifiable events" (*College English* 56:(511-526).

<sup>16</sup>The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (1986), conclude that "women often feel alienated in academic settings and experience "formal" education as either peripheral or irrelevant to their central interests and development" (4). For

other working-class students -- more rooted in the interpersonal relationships and care-taking activities they participate in at home, and limited by the subordinate roles they play in the workplace. Thus, their literacy narratives begin with their own turbulent accounts of families and working lives -- the settings where their most conflicted encounters with language and learning take place. The production of these journals about their multiple roles complicates their perceptions of their experiences as wives, mothers, and working women. At the same time, their analysis of issues like the value our culture assigns to housework, their retrospective accounts working-class schooling, and their interpretation and comparison of their experiences at their job sites and on the college campus provide evidence that these women had truly accepted my invitation to write literacy narratives that consider their gendered/class position in relation to culture and society.

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adult working women students like the paras, these feelings of alienation are often exacerbated by the demands of their domestic and working lives.

### Chapter Three

#### "Between Dirty Dishes and Polished Discourse": Narrative Reflections on Gender, Race, and Class

##### Introduction

This chapter explores the narrative reflections on readings the women wrote on five alternate Mondays: October 21st, November 4th, November 18th, December 2nd, and December 16th. These texts, highlighting issues of gender, race, and class, integrated material from the paras' autobiographical journals with our readings in the course so as to connect personal experience with textual content. Narratives written by Gloria, Cassandra, Monique, Laura, Svetlana, and Angelica are presented in this chapter, along with journals composed by Carole, a fifty-four-year-old mother of two and grandmother of four; Margaret, a fifty-two-year-old mother of one and grandmother of three; Diane, a thirty-four-year-old mother of three; Rebecca, a fifty-two-year-old mother of three; Karen, a twenty-eight-year-old mother of two; Monica, a forty-nine-year-old African-American mother of two and grandmother of six; and Julie, a sixty-four-year-old mother of one and grandmother of two.

As discussed in Chapter One, the womens' first narrative reflections (on the "Preface" to *The Bluest Eye*)

offered two distinct composing strategies in response to the infusion of outside source material into their narrative writing. Specifically, two-thirds of the women limited their first reflective journals on the "Preface" to brief essays in which they moved from summary, to critique, analysis, and interpretation. The remaining third composed responses so deeply rooted in personal experience that they rarely surfaced to undertake themes outside the women's immediate surroundings. Although their peer group analyses of Morrison's portrayal of the American family in the "Preface,"<sup>1</sup> produced some integration of the personal experience and interpretation of textual content, the most useful and engaging commentary on the novel emerged on Monday, October 21st when they wrote their first reflective journals.<sup>2</sup> To facilitate their narrative reflections on the novel, I asked the women to use themes from their first autobiographical journals on "domestic life" (October 14th) as source material to examine how Morrison raises issues of gender, race, and class in the novel.

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<sup>1</sup>See Chapter One, pp.72-78.

<sup>2</sup>As stated earlier, the two forms of narrative (autobiographical and reflective responses to readings) were written concurrently (on alternate weeks) throughout the semester along with more formal essays. However, the paras began composing autobiographical accounts on the first day of class, while reflective journals on reading selections did not get underway until October 2nd (the fourth week of classes), as the first three weeks were devoted to gathering the reading material and composing the syllabus.

"From Autobiography to Textual Reflection":  
Images of Gender, Race, and Class in *The Bluest Eye*

As the value of "housework" had emerged as the primary theme of womens' autobiographical accounts at the previous narrative session (October 14th), I was not surprised that fifteen out of the twenty-four women present on October 21st focused their first reflective journals on Morrison's portrayal of the character Pauline Breedlove as a domestic worker and child-care provider in the Fisher household. Through the lens of their autobiographical accounts of housework, these reflective narratives raised some interesting questions about the cumulative effects of gender, race, and class. For example, Gloria (whose autobiographical narrative entitled "housekeeping" vs. "homemaking" sparked some lively debate on the connections between domestic life and individual values), composed a reflective narrative on her past experience as a full-time domestic worker:

Before I became a para, I was employed from time to time as a domestic worker, and I can personally identify with Pauline's class-based desire for "beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise...to be queen of canned

vegetables bought by the case, special fondants and ribbon candy curled up in tiny silver dishes...power, praise, and luxury ...in this household" (Morrison, 128).

Drawing on her autobiographical narrative to contrast "homemaking" with "domestic employment," Gloria used her self-generated text to examine some significant connections and distinctions between Pauline's story and her own, citing the following passage from Morrison's text:

Beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise...to be queen of the canned vegetables brought by the case, special fondants and ribbon candy curled up in tiny silver dishes. Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household (128).

She wrote:

Working in a clean house with new, efficient appliances and beautiful furniture (and getting paid for it) is not the same back-breaking labor as scrubbing my old, dirty floors. In my apartment, nothing will ever be clean no matter how hard I work. On the other hand, domestic work is a "job," while homemaking is something

I do for myself and my family...I don't think Pauline had that type of commitment to her own family. She saw herself, primarily, as a domestic worker in someone else's house.

For two women of color in the class (Cassandra and Monique), Gloria's assessment of Pauline Breedlove evoked a tangled web of conflict that centered on her gendered/class position vs. her deeply rooted self-hatred of her "blackness." Specifically, Cassandra criticized Gloria's "glossing over" what she called "the racial issue." She said:

I think that Gloria missed the point of the passage she cited in her text. In my opinion, Morrison, in this scene, was emphasizing the negative effect that working for a wealthy white family had on a poor Black woman.

To explain her point, Cassandra read an excerpt from her own reflective narrative on Pauline Breedlove:

She [Morrison] is dissing Pauline for worshipping white people. Especially, the part where she beats her own child while she comforts the little blonde baby girl.

Monique spoke next, saying that she agreed with Cassandra about the scenes in the Fisher household raising the profile of race as well as class, but she was more sympathetic to Pauline in her analysis of these passages, and she also introduced some interesting connections among race, class, and gender by integrating material from her autobiographical narrative on housework:

In my narrative on "housework" last week, I wrote about an experience I had one summer as a domestic worker. I wanted to earn extra money to go back to Haiti to visit my mother, and I found employment as a live-in maid for a white family in Greenwich, Connecticut. My babies, who were all pre-school at the time, lived with my aunt in the Bronx. I saw them only on my day off, Thursday. Like Pauline, I enjoyed my work because the surroundings were elegant and secure. I had my own air-conditioned room, color T.V., and the whole house to myself from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. I love my kids, but I hated going back to the Bronx. I just loved cleaning that big country house with the dishwasher, the self-cleaning oven, and four color tile baths. Did I fantasize that this was my house? You bet I did --all the time. Looking back on this three month period, I

still feel the guilty about what I needed to do to get money and the fact that I enjoyed this job even though it took me away from my kids.

Responses to this conflicted narrative were mixed; while two or three women offered comments suggesting that Pauline and Monique shared common feelings for their work in affluent white households, the vast majority saw little connection between Monique and Pauline Breedlove. For example, Gloria cited Pauline's long-term neglect of her own family as a point of contention.

There is no comparison between Monique's summer job, which was a temporary solution to an immediate need. Her children were well cared for at the time. Pauline Breedlove neglected her own children while she tended to her employer's family.

Gloria's comment sparked an immediate response from Carole, a fifty-four-year-old white woman who had written a great deal during our narrative sessions, but had never spoken in class. "As a mother of two adult daughters and a grandmother," Carole said, "I have to question the choices available to Pauline or Monique in the first place." Carole

had written a response narrative entitled "Career Choices" which she said she was reluctant to read because it did not really focus on "housework" or address the issue of race. I said (and the class agreed) that there were no restrictions on these reflective narratives. Carole agreed to read a portion of her text aloud:

Throughout the novel, we meet lots of poor women, most of whom are doing whatever they have to do to survive and to feed their families. Who says Mrs. MacTeer, who takes strange men into her house is more virtuous than Pauline Breedlove who doesn't have a room to rent and must earn money to feed and clothe her kids? It's nice to have a particular set of "family values" and "behavior standards," provided your economic situation allows you to live by them. But, for many women, not just Black women, there are very few career choices, so they have to do whatever they have to do. For example, I worked in a beauty parlor when my kids were small because I had a beautician's license and I could bring my kids to the shop. Lots of my well-to-do customers told me how bad the fumes from the nail polish, hair dye, and hair spray were for my children to be breathing in all day. That "standard" of childcare was

great for them because they had money to spend on babysitters while they got new hairdos and manicures. For me, there was no choice. If I didn't bring my kids to work, I didn't earn money, if I didn't earn money, my kids didn't eat. Of course, they thought I was a bad mother, and I never defended myself because I needed their business.

In this powerful and insightful narrative, drawn from an autobiographical account of her former occupation as a hairdresser, Carole clarified the economic pressures on poor and working-class women, generating dialogue on the conflicts between child-rearing and paid employment wage-labor (for women who see labor doesn't pay enough to cover childcare for their own kids). Her reflective narrative also offered a clear example of how the womens' autobiographical texts were useful in mediating the inconsistent and conflicted intersections of gender, race, and class encoded in their assigned reading material. Specifically, while the narrative reflections read by three women of color focused on the issue of race, Carole's response illuminated issues of gender and class embedded in the everyday lives of the characters. After reading her narrative, Carole told the class:

At first glance, I found Pauline Breedlove to be a despicable character -- immature, selfish, a terrible mother. But later, I found in my own autobiographical narrative, a tiny connection to Pauline Breedlove that disturbed me. I started to think of the judgments I sensed coming from my customers about my own ability to mother.

Carole called this disturbing recognition "a moment when I had to admit that sometimes mothers have to compromise between the ideal and the possible."

At this point, our time ran out. However, there were several students who had been waiting patiently on the sidelines hoping to read narratives that focused on other aspects of the novel. Thus, the class decided to continue our discussion of the novel at the next reflective narrative session on November 4th, at which time we would turn our attention to narratives that focused on scenes depicting the MacTeer and Breedlove children.

My teaching journal on this session focused on the "rationales" more than half of the women had written as part of the introduction to their first reflective narratives. Specifically, these narratives contained opening passages that explained the process the writer used to select

excerpts from the novel (how they interpreted connections and distinctions between their own experiences and those of the characters, how they expanded or re-focused their autobiographical accounts to incorporate some larger issues the novel addressed, etc.). Thus, in reading these narrative reflections I was impressed not only by my students' capacity to move beyond the details inscribed in their personal accounts of housework (integrating their own stories with our reading material), but even more encouraged by their ability to articulate the process they used to negotiate the boundaries between personal experience and textual content. In particular, my journal recorded my impressions of Carole's "rationale":

Carole's opening paragraph discusses what she calls, "my delayed process of discovery while reading Morrison's novel." She writes,

I hated the part about Pauline Breedlove and since I never did any kind of domestic work or baby-sitting [for pay], I didn't identify with her. I was thoroughly disgusted with her by the time I got to the part where she hit Pecola for knocking over the pies. Then, I remembered how one day in the beauty shop my

kids were running around and knocked a set of steaming rollers onto a customer's's lap. Only the layers of draping protected this woman from being scalded. I grabbed Krista (my older daughter) by the hair, dragged her into the bathroom and beat the living daylights out of her behind the closed door. This awful memory connected me to Pauline in a way and made me think about how working mothers often have to choose between the "ideal" and the "possible." After re-reading the story of Pauline in the Fisher kitchen, I just had to write about it"...

This introduction (which Carole chose not to share with the class) signals an important step a number of the paras are taking at this point in the semester. They are using the reading for more than "facts" and beginning to recognize the larger social issues embedded in their own accounts of everyday life. I was moved by this "rationale" (and others like it) and I hope that these reflections on readings will (at some point) help to foster this kind of depth and clarity in their analytical essays.

The "Outside" and the "Inside" Child  
Narrative Reflections on Childhood in *The Bluest Eye*

At our second narrative session on *The Bluest Eye* (November 4th), the women took up the issue of how Morrison portrays childhood -- one that Laura, Cassandra, Joan, Svetlana, and Angelica were most eager to explore. Laura, who had previously written an autobiographical account of her experience as the child of Jewish immigrants, compared her own response to her "outsider" status at school to what she believed was the young narrator of the novel's "race-based" reaction to the "Shirley Temple Cup" and being given a white baby doll for Christmas:

In one of my autobiographical narratives, I discussed the identity conflict I faced as a small child between being a real American and being Jewish. In writing this account of my childhood, I suddenly remembered how I did everything possible to fit into American culture and to hide my immigrant identity (even though looking back as an adult, I know that I was never really an immigrant, I just had two Jewish parents who spoke Yiddish). While reading the novel, I found it incredible that a nine-year-old girl would reject things that were considered "ideal" by most girls her

age, by the culture in general, and most of all by her own parents. Most kids want to "fit in" (even when it is obvious that they never will). To me, Claudia seems very strange.

More than half the women strongly disagreed with Laura's assumption that most nine-year-old children feel the need to "fit in" more than they need to "rebel." Gloria, in particular, pointed out, "It's possible to assimilate when you can just change your accent and blend into the mainstream. Try changing your skin color." Cassandra saw Claudia's dismembering of the white baby doll and her hatred of the bouncy-blond Shirley Temple as more of a normal response to what some called "the impossibility of fitting in." Cassandra, who worked as a "special reading para" for African-American children<sup>3</sup> whose school performance lagged behind their (official) aptitude as measured on standardized tests pointed out an interesting phenomenon she noticed at her job site, saying "The children rejected most of the material offered by the school, but perform well with more culturally diverse readings I introduce them to." Cassandra

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<sup>3</sup>Cassandra made it clear that African-American children are not assigned to these reading groups exclusively, nor are they the only group whose test scores and actual performance do not correlate. However, she said that according to the Board of Education records, they are five times more likely to be placed in these settings than other minority students (Hispanic, Asian, Haitian) and ten times more likely when compared to whites.

concluded that if Claudia was a student in the 1990's instead of the 1940's she would probably be assigned this kind of "special reading circle" because she would be recognized as a student who needed "something other" than what the standard curriculum provides. Cassandra's explanation of Claudia's behavior reminded me of John Ogbu's educational theory of "oppositional identity" which posits that for some African-American students to do well in school is understood as "acting white" (Fox, 75). However, when I offered this explanation to the class, nine out of ten women disagreed with me. The general consensus in the room was that Claudia's behavior was less focused on "oppositional identity" than on "individual likes and dislikes." Specifically, they pointed out that Cassandra's assumptions about Claudia's school performance were not supported by evidence in the novel. Stephanie summarized their perspective on Claudia as "a bright kid who had some strong opinions on justice and rebelled against situations she thought were unfair, even though she didn't always understand the full meaning behind these events."

The issues under consideration now shifted slightly when Svetlana, Joan, Angelica, and Margaret read narrative reflections which focused on other children in the novel. Svetlana, drawing on an autobiographical account of the pain

her children endured as students who were shunned by other children at their Brooklyn Yeshiva because they came from a "broken home," wrote a reflection on the scene in the novel where Pecola was being taunted in the schoolyard:

I chose the passage where Pecola is surrounded by a group of boys shouting insults about her father and "matters over which the victim had no control" (Morrison, 65). This reminded me of my autobiographical journal on the same kind of conflict my own kids faced in school. I did not read this journal in class because it discussed my dismay at being a mother in a dysfunctional family, but I will share some of it now... In small community of Russian immigrants, there are no secrets. Before my divorce, my husband was brought home one night by neighbors who found him sleeping on the street, and was arrested for drug possession outside our apartment the next day. My children were victimized by their classmates and looked upon as "savages" by their teachers who believed they brought the troubles at school upon themselves. Reading this scene in the novel brought this particular journal to mind because I realized that my children were just like Pecola in that schoolyard. To the others, they

represented the worst thing that could happen to a family, and other children (who may have been afraid of the conflicts in their own homes, which no one knew about) used them to keep negative attention focused on someone else.

Svetlana's reflective narrative prompted the other women to read their own accounts which connected this scene from the novel with "victimized" children at their school job sites. Joan's reflection summarized these accounts best:

As a para, I have seen Pecola's experience played out hundreds of times. Children sense low self-esteem, and they hear stories about the troubles of other families at home and in their neighborhoods. Unfortunately, teachers aren't trained to deal with these problems. Not knowing what to do, they send the "victim" to the school psychologist or refer them to a social service agency. But they routinely ignore the taunts of other children in their classrooms and in the school playgrounds and the troubled child is either beaten up by their classmates or isolated from them, entirely.

Through these narrative reflections on this scene in

the novel, the women began to exercise critical reflection on the experiences of the children at their job-sites,<sup>4</sup> which encouraged them to critique the response (or lack thereof) of school teachers and administrators to the plight of children living in dysfunctional families. Most interesting were texts which illuminated the distinctions between the kind of dysfunction in Pecola's family and another form of domestic upheaval that is equally destructive, but may actually serve to protect neglectful or abusive parents from scrutiny by school personnel. This interrogation of various kinds of family dysfunction emerged when Angelica read a passage aloud from the novel that focused on an upwardly mobile black family whose self-hatred was manifested through a separation of "colored people" and "niggers" (Morrison, 86). Angelica's reflective narrative was drawn from an autobiographical account in which described incidents when she personally witnessed disturbing incidents involving children at her school job site:

One particular incident I recall involved two nine-year-old boys who got into a fight in the wardrobe

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<sup>4</sup>Although the autobiographical narratives contained a number of entries on the paras' present jobs in the school system, the narrative reflections on readings produced a closer examination of various work settings, and helped the paras to integrate a number of different work experiences into their analysis of their multiple roles in working-class culture.

closet. The teacher was at the front of the room and did not see what happened, but I did. One of the boys pushed the other into the coat rack taunting him about his "jail-bird" father and his "drunken mother." The other boy grabbed a coat hanger and starting hitting him on the head with it. I broke up the fight and told the teacher how it started. But, when the mothers came up to school, the teacher took the word of the one whose son started the whole thing. She sent the other kid to the principal for hitting.

From this incident, Angelica concluded:

They [school teachers] tend to believe people who look and behave like them, not even the word of a para who witnessed the incident can sway that kind of judgment.

In the discussion which followed, Angelica insisted that social class and education of the child's parents played a far greater role than outward appearances. Her reflective narrative went on to address the scene in which Morrison contrasted the physical appearance of Geraldine and her son Luis, Jr. to Pecola:

Imagine meeting someone like Geraldine at a parent-teacher conference. "The pretty milk-brown lady in the pretty gold-and-green house...with the nice, neat colored son" (Morrison, 92). Now imagine confronting Mrs. Breedlove about an altercation between this child and her daughter, Pecola, "With the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of the shoe, the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up" (91).

Angelica followed this long quote with a summary of the impression the two children would make on a teacher:

What would you do if you were the teacher? That is, if you could get Mrs. Breedlove to come up to school. Although we know from reading the novel that both of these children live in dysfunctional families, Pecola would be sent to social services, perhaps placed in foster care. Junior would remain in school, free to terrorize other kids.

The fact that Luis Jr., a well-dressed, well-cared-for child, lured the unkempt Pecola into his house, then killed the family cat, and blamed it on her, surprised none of the women in the room, because, as Joan pointed out, "Luis Jr. was also suffering from lack of attention and care."

Cassandra thought it was interesting that Morrison's [African-American] point of view portrayed characters trying to be "upscale" Blacks as a defense against white supremacy. She also said she thought that Geraldine's character was even more self-destructive and dysfunctional than Pauline Breedlove. To support this assertion, she pointed out:

The child abuse Jr. suffered was even more insidious than Pecola's because it wasn't the obvious kind of neglect that appears in the case of poor children... like dirty fingernails or head lice, or ripped, soiled clothing...it was the kind that teachers and other parents can ignore because the "outside" child seems well cared for.

I asked the women how teachers (or parents of classmates) could really be expected to identify such children whose "outside" appears to be "well cared for"? The women agreed that it's often difficult, sometimes even impossible to

· recognize the Luis Jr.'s because the Pecolas are so obvious. However, not everyone agreed with Angelica's conclusion about the social class and education of parents influencing teachers because they are also middle-class and college educated. Margaret spoke for many others when she pointed out, "Teachers are not social workers, or judges, or child psychologists, or family therapists. They cannot be expected to know what goes in a child's home, they can only be expected to act upon evidence of neglect or abuse that they see with their own eyes. Margaret also noted that Pecola's situation was, in many respects, more desperate than Luis Jr.'s because her physical health and safety were being compromised (as proven at the end of the novel when her own father raped her).

That night, I wrote in my teaching journal:

I was surprised by the variety of themes the women addressed in these narratives -- many that were not read in class also offered insightful perspectives on issues such as: relationships between mothers and daughters in the novel, the role of the media in shaping the characters' self-concepts, the practice of renting rooms to "outsiders," and the consequences of male unemployment and family violence. From these

reflective narratives, the students were able to generate a wide range of topics for their analytical essays on the novel.

#### On Women's Work: Inside and Outside the Home

On November 18th, the class moved from fiction to shorter selections of poetry and prose. The women's narrative reflections examined race, class, and gender more confidently because debate was anticipated and welcomed as a part of the learning process. For example, in response to Judy Syfers's "I Want a Wife," women of color, without exception, attacked Syfers's elitist stereotype of the family as a unit with a gainfully employed male at its center who could afford to keep his wife at home to wait on him and dote on his children. Specifically, Monique and Cassandra wrote narratives in which they imaginatively changed places with Syfers, and concluded that they prefer affluent homemaking to the low-pay, low-status jobs they must take. Monique's conclusion was most forceful in its attack on specific passages on the role of mothers:

Syfers says she wants a wife to "make sure my children eat properly, are kept clean, to keep clothes mended,

to take them to the park, the zoo, etc." (342). These are all the things I wish I had time and money to do. I'll go live in her house anytime -- this woman is selfish, spoiled rotten -- and crazy.

This response shocked the younger (under forty) white paras who agreed with Syfers, many insisting that they would be in graduate school by now, if only they had a wife to take care of their domestic needs. For example, Joan pointed out that this essay is not really about class, but focuses on gender, exclusively. She said:

Even women who have to work, still have to do all the things the author complains about, but that's not the point of the essay. The point is that men are adults, but don't have to be responsible for taking care of their own basic needs, they are also parents, but they don't have to be responsible for taking care of the children they help bring into the world.

Of the twenty-six women present that day, twenty said they agreed with Joan. The four who disagreed (Cassandra, Monique, Carole, and Margaret) were divided between issues of social class and issues of gender roles. Although most

women in the room understood the class-based perspective Cassandra and Monique endorsed in their narratives, they did think either would be happy in the long run with their "imaginary" lives became real. On the other hand, the responses of Carole and Margaret, both white women over fifty, provoked the most controversy because they said that Syfers reduced the most significant identity of women in the family to a composite sketch of its "working parts." They argued, as well, that being a wife and mother was not a "role" in the same way as being a para or a student. Carol explained her position as follows:

I used to be a hairdresser, now I am a para, someday I hope to be a teacher. I'm a student today, but I won't always be in school. These aspects of my life I consider roles because they are temporary. On the other hand, being a mother is a permanent identity, not just a role. When I became a mother, I made an irrevocable decision. That is, no matter where I go or what other roles I play, I'll always be "mom."

The women challenged Carol's distinction between a role and an identity on the basis that although her job title had changed over time and might change in the future, her role

as a "working woman" was not temporary, but every bit as permanent as the role of mother. At this point, I asked the class why all of the narratives had taken Syfers's satirical description of womens' roles in the family for granted? I wanted to know why no one challenged the notion that the tedious chores of domestic life should be relegated to women, exclusively? I asked the women "What does it mean to be mom? Is there a unitary<sup>5</sup> definition?" The women argued that Syfers's essay defined the family as they know it, with one exception: most women can no longer afford to stay home with children; they must take care of the family and earn a salary to help pay the bills, as well. A few challenged me for suggesting that they revise their domestic roles just as I insist that they revise their papers. For example, Stephanie asked, "Can a family be revised like a college paper?" I said, "No, family life is old, complex, and conflicted in ways that a college paper is not." Being conscious of my own struggle to balance my needs as a student and aspiring professional with the realities of family and working-class life, I could not tell my students that their role conflicts could be resolved easily or soon.

However, my sense of critical pedagogy is that inquiry

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<sup>5</sup>I used this term in class after some paras argued with the first term I chose ("singular") pointing out that plural definitions of motherhood can still be unified into a cohesive whole.

does not stop where my students' questions begin. A "problem-posing" approach was useful in helping the paras interpret "revision" from multiple perspectives. I then asked the class to come up with a collective definition of "revising" as it is understood in the writing class. After some debate, they agreed that revision changes the organization of a paper, develops its ideas, and corrects surface features of writing. From this definition, the class drew some parallels for Carole's role as a mother. Posing some common problems mothers encounter in raising children (the "terrible twos," sibling rivalry, teenage autonomy, etc.), the class eventually concluded that Carole's mothering role had been re-organizing, developing, and correcting itself for decades in order to accommodate the changing needs of her children. Although most were eager to point out that the process of "revision" is much slower and infinitely more complex in families, some also noted that revision of our mothering roles is inevitable; the real issue is whether we actively participate in the process or we resist it until our children make the changes for us. Although I was impressed by the women's move from a unitary vision of mothering to a more evolutionary one, I could not help but notice that their notion of development remained tied to a traditional patriarchal image of family.

(A traditional "mom" evolves as kids age, but a feminist revision of "mom" would produce a different evolution of motherhood). Further, for older paras, like Carole, embracing "mom" as a permanent, unitary identity confirms their resistance to intellectual life, suggesting an ethos of "self-sacrifice via mothering and revealing that the long-term role of "working-woman" is not as critical to female identity in patriarchy as the gender-typed role of "mom." The younger women in the room said they felt more comfortable with their roles as "working-mothers" because they believe it is accepted as "necessary" even in working-class culture. As Karen, a twenty-eight-year-old mother of two and the youngest para in the class pointed out:

I grew up with a working-mother who saw herself as a mother by choice and a worker by necessity. She worried that my sister and I would suffer because she worked outside the home -- we didn't, really, but people did look down on her. For myself, I also have to work, but there is less conflict because I see how much my mom, my sister, and I benefitted (in the long-run) from her independence and work experience.

As class time ran out, the women were still engaged in

a heated discussion of the conflicts between mothering and working outside the home. My teaching journal centered on my surprise that age had overshadowed race and class in this narrative session.

As Cassandra and Monique began to read their satirical narrative responses to Syfers's essay, I was prepared for the "white" [nuclear] family to emerge as the central focus of our discussion. To my surprise, no one pounced on Monique's characterization of Syfers as "spoiled, selfish, and crazy" (a stereotypical image of the "rich white bitch" encoded in this text). Even economic status seemed subsumed beneath the womens' generational differences (as the younger women grew up accepting working-mothers as the norm). I was impressed by the paras' response to problem-posing as the entire group seemed able to quickly connect the idea of revising a paper to revising a role. What I found most gratifying about this session was the sustained discussion that only a few narratives produced. Thus, we were able to spend more time on analysis of fewer texts as the women are growing into more active listeners and more subtle critiques of the source material and the narrative responses it

generates.

Despite the emergence of previously subsumed dimensions of their lives in their response narratives, multiple conflicts continued to emerge in the womens' narratives gender issues. Therefore, I was not surprised that their initial narrative reflections on some feminist writers (written on December 2nd) stressed their differences, not common conditions. For example, Monica, a forty-nine-year-old African-American mother of two and grandmother of six, had convinced the women in her peer group that the class should read something by Audre Lorde. Although did not submit a sample reading for the women to consider during the selection process at the beginning of the term, she asked me to choose an appropriate essay for her. In response, I chose "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference."

This narrative session began as one of the most explosive episodes of the semester. In the opening lines of this essay, Lorde defines herself as "a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two and a member of an interracial couple" (114). All of the paras responded

negatively to Lorde's self-definition, and Black women, in particular, were repelled by her lesbian/interracial identities. In addition, the word *socialist* provoked an image in their minds of a potentially deviant combination of two politically active lesbians raising children. Unanimously, the class declared Lorde a "radical" and a "subversive." Lorde offers this brief self-description (with all the "wrong labels" attached to it) in order to critically analyze what she calls "the systematized oppression of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women" (114). Not one student acknowledged common ground with Lorde on issues of race, class, age, or gender in her narrative reflection on the essay; and women of color said that they were both annoyed and offended by this reading selection which they described in their narratives as "degrading to Black women." No one wanted to read her narrative aloud (although I saw that everyone had written a substantial piece in her journal that day and many were anxious to submit their individual narratives for my commentary).

Surprised by their negative reaction, I can say that these women were educating me, the teacher, about how they see the world. But, I was not yet willing to give up. I decided to move deeper into the issues presented in the

text. After much discussion of lesbianism and social activism, the class agreed to compose self-definitions and compare them to the "mythical norm" that Lorde identifies with "the trappings of social power: white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure" (116). Gloria summarized the consensus of the class most succinctly when she wrote:

I'm not white, thin, male, young, Christian, or financially secure, but I am heterosexual...I still believe that being a lesbian is a sin against God and I wonder how those children with two mommies and no daddy will ever grow up normal. However, at first, all I saw in Lorde's identity was the label "lesbian"...that separates us...But, in all the other categories she mentions, I, too, am an "outsider," and I share her position as a member of the powerless groups.

For Gloria (and most other women in the room), it all boiled down to lesbianism as the "sticking point," but some also picked up on the socialist label as well (nine out of ten admitting that they believed the terms "socialist" and "communist" to be synonymous and that either one is equivalent to "anti-American"). Although, in retrospect, I

was not surprised by their allegiance to a capitalist economy which (unbeknownst to them) constructs their low-status, low-pay positions in the American economy, I was anxious to keep the class focused on their own responses to the readings, so, I restrained my impulse to offer further reading material on Capitalism or Marxism. I collected their narratives that day and sent them home with the promise that I would read and comment on each one. My teaching journal shows that I decided to err on the side of caution -- not to impose my political beliefs on my students:

Although much of what I read in these reflective narratives on Lorde could be interpreted as based not on a reading of the article, but on assumptions about the author, I tried to find something concrete to say to each writer about her own text. In retrospect, I see that my own restraint and the strategic use of individual lists ultimately saved the session from deteriorating into a shouting match between students and teacher. Despite the negative atmosphere the article generated in class, I was impressed by the fact that the women did not respond to this article in the same way as they did to the Board of Ed. pamphlet.

They read it (from beginning to end), decided they objected to the content, and wrote responses that clearly articulated and supported their opinions. Thus, the session illuminated how far they have come in terms of their own authority to critique their reading material.

"Being a Para is Being in Paradise":  
Narratives on Other Lines of Work

From another perspective, some of the readings suggested by the paras themselves raised the profile of working-class life, particularly those aspects that represent the diversity of the female experience in the workplace. Before they came to my writing class, most of the paras were unaware that women without formal education wrote published accounts of working conditions in a variety of job settings and historical eras. For instance, a few had heard stories of the infamous 1911 "Triangle Fire" in lower New York through the oral histories of their grandmothers and grandaunts who had worked there, but they had never read accounts of the tragedy by survivors or witnesses. Fortunately, during our peer-group selection of reading material for the course, Joan brought some pamphlets on the "Triangle Fire" that she had received at a campus

exhibit she attended in the fall of 1991 commemorating the 80th anniversary of the tragedy. She suggested that the class read some first-hand accounts of the fire for their reflective narratives on gender. Once we began to examine this kind of source material, a number of women wrote narratives on their previous work experience in filthy and unsafe factories. Diane, a thirty-four-year-old mother of three summarized a common para experience -- the joy of finding "work" in the field of education:

Being hired by the Board of Education was the best thing that ever happened to me. Even though many other paras complain about the conditions on this job, I know that I have it good, now. From the age of sixteen, I worked sixty hours per week as a seamstress in a sweatshop on the lower east side where there was no fresh air (mostly because of the cigar smoking boss who shut all the windows and fans whenever the line got held up and production slowed down). He screamed and cursed at the women workers and he wasn't above taking sexual advantage of the younger girls who had no green cards. Being a para is being in paradise compared to this occupation, and I can't believe that I'm working with children, now, and going to college.

Diane's narrative about New York City sweatshops in the 1990's (not the 1890's) made me aware of the small distance society has travelled for some people and the vast distance some of these women had already travelled to reach freshman writing. Her horrific story of sixty-hour work weeks and sexually abusive bosses also made me conscious of how much I had taken for granted in my own life. Although some of the women were housewives (like me) before coming to college, others had long, painful histories as marginal workers in various settings, including the needle trades. Our discussion of these personal accounts sparked vivid written reflections on the conditions of factory life (rats and mice in the lockers, cockroaches running through sewing machines, verbal and physical assaults by male supervisors, mandatory overtime/unexpected layoffs, etc.). Thus, compared to the lowest ranks of working-class jobs, the stresses and conflicts of para labor seemed much less onerous because cleaner conditions and the opportunity for college classes represented a giant "step-up" for these women.

Essentially, reading these narratives on work and listening to the womens' stories of their former job settings confirmed the paras' positions as *silent facilitators* particularly in relation to their families. As Svetlana (who also found employment in the garment center

after coming to the U.S. from Russia) explained in her narrative on factory life:

When you work in a factory, you put in long hours because in most places you get paid by the piece. The more pieces you finish, the more money you make. You don't want to waste time complaining about the conditions that you cannot change because that time comes out of your earnings and you don't want to bring these unpleasant experiences home because you spend so little time with your family. The purpose of this kind of work is making money so that you can make life better for your children.

Clearly, for many of these women, the primary function of work is "to make life better for their children." From this perspective, "job satisfaction" has little to do with "self-satisfaction" or "personal fulfillment." Being a para is being in paradise because the setting not only provides better working conditions and guaranteed hourly pay, but also facilitates their primary objective (making life better for their children). Thus, their orientation toward work, based on their own life experience as adults with family responsibilities conflicts with the model of personal

"upward mobility" they encounter on the college campus. Being a para and coming to college is seen as a means to facilitate their childrens' future success. I was moved by these narratives, and gained much need insight into the diversity of female working-class experience.

Then, the class moved on to "The Fire Poems,"<sup>6</sup> and a few pieces of writing tucked away by a previous generation found their way into our writing class. Rebecca, a fifty-two-year-old mother of three whose family had escaped the pogroms of Russia at the turn of the century, offered a glimpse of her grandmother's scrap-book. It was filled with pictures, newspaper clippings, and hand-written vignettes jotted down by a number of women who wanted to record memories of friends who were victims of the terrible fire. In her narrative reflection on "The Fire Poems," she wrote:

My grandmother worked in a factory across the street from Triangle. She wrote a few lines in her scrap-book about women she knew (who died there). But, it was only something she wanted to do for herself (to remember them). Later, other women she worked with wrote remembrances in it as well. She never wanted to

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<sup>6</sup>Specifically, the paras read poems by Carol Tarlen, Mary Fell, Sofiya Henderson Holmes, and Chris Llewellyn, who are a few contemporary working-class writers who have written about the Triangle Fire.

part with this book or to make it public because it records a very personal memory.

This comment illustrates the borders that many working-class women maintain between public and private discourse about events. These public/private conflicts reappear in "The Mighty Wedge of Class," a moving essay on the dissonance between "middle-class packaging" and a "working-class core," by J. Todd Erkel, whose mother is uncomfortable with his willingness to expose (in his professional essays) personal details of his life "where anyone might read them" (104). In a subsequent narrative, Rebecca wrote about a similar conflict between her sense that she was betraying her (now deceased) grandmother by showing this scrap-book to "strangers," while at the same time, she said that she felt compelled to do so by her desire to share something that had "historical and social relevance in a college course." Rebecca also pointed out that the scrapbook told the story of an event in the distant past -- one her grandmother recounted to her when she was a child. Therefore, she had to search for the feelings those conversations conjured up in her childhood. David Bleich points to the potential benefits of such recollection:

If one task of the literacy classroom is to try to reconstruct [our] history, then many hours can be spent thinking and asking friends and family about what one only partially remembers, and a surprising number of salient events of the past can be assembled. While it is never clear how "accurate" our memories are, the fact of having remembered something important always facilitates new reflection and analysis (184).

My teaching journal recorded these stories of work as aspects of separation from my own experience and that of the "Scholarship Boys and Girls:"

The life experience of these women is far more complex and much more distant from my own than I had previously assumed -- much more than my gaining access to the elite track of higher education while they remained on the vocational track. Although their long-term experience with career-based classes re-enforced their attitudes toward work and higher education, their prior experiences at the lowest rung of the economic system (piece work in factories) socialized them to view hourly work as a career goal. In addition, my choice to return to school (rather than to remain in the

lunchroom) was an exchange of one life circumstance for another. By contrast, these women must do both -- and their narratives confirm that they see college, not as a means to explore their options, but as an opportunity to learn more (and earn more) in the workplace they inhabit. Although this perspective seems limited to me, it is actually a much more expansive vision of work than factory life allowed them to contemplate.

"Individual Rights Don't Always Apply Individually":  
What Separates "Us" From "Them"

At the next class session (December 16th), the paras' narrative reflections on additional short-prose readings revealed another aspect of their orientation toward "knowledge" -- their need to separate what they saw as "objective" opinions on social issues from the conditions of their own lives. To this end, they employed a number of rhetorical strategies to distance their critical commentary on readings from their own lived experience. A clear example of this tendency appears in their narrative reflections on Adrienne Rich's essay "Taking Women Students Seriously." While no one disagreed (in principle) with Rich's arguments on gender stereotypes limiting educational opportunities for women, nine out of ten women exempted

themselves from the group of women to whom she refers. Janice, whose autobiographical narrative focused on the conflicts between her domestic responsibilities and school work, summed up a line of thought when she wrote:

I absolutely agree with Rich. Women have a right to develop their intellectual potentials. However, the author points out that her successful female teachers were single, by choice. Women who choose to marry and have children no longer have a right to be autonomous individuals -- they belong to a family.

The problem with this position in response to Rich's text is that "men" are exempted from the restrictions of family life imposed on women. Only two narrative responses directly addressed Rich's claims about the special restrictions on women in families, in a society that insists "doing the dishes" is more important for women than "studying" (333). These two responses did, in fact, refer back to Stephanie's early journal on domestic life which explored the connection between dishwashing and studying, recalling that Stephanie's husband was watching television while she washed dirty pots and pans. They pointed out how her story supported the patriarchal assumption that all

family chores like doing the dishes are "women's work." However, they did not address the role conflict between household chores and academic work also encoded in this domestic scene. A third response offered by Karen, a twenty-eight-year-old mother of two (and the youngest para in the class), took a novel approach to the Rich text by depicting her own chronological history with dishwashing. Karen wrote:

When I was very young, I loved to wash the dishes. Mom would stand me on the step-ladder and I would spray the rinse water; the reward was getting wet. In elementary school, I washed the nun's dishes after lunch; the reward was getting out of math class. In high school, I washed dishes after card parties, PTA meetings, and school dances; the reward was "school service credits." By the time I got married, I realized that the only reward for doing dishes is more dirty dishes...It's not that doing the dishes is a big deal, but Rich made me think about the alternative "rewards" I didn't get, like playing outdoors with my brothers after dinner, like learning math, like getting "school service credits" for more important activities like community service...Because I was brought up to value doing the

dishes, I missed out on more interesting options.

Karen's story of her gendered/class connection to dishwashing prompted an in-class discussion of the role that dirty dishes (and other domestic duties) played in the lives of these working-class women from childhood to adolescence and adulthood. Most reported that they had assumed they would get married, have children, wash dishes, and perform other household chores. Many recalled being taught early on by their mothers how to play their future domestic roles (a kind of normative knowledge expected of them). But, no one in the room, including myself, assumed we would go to college, nor did anyone else expect us to, or prepare us to acquire this *other* kind of knowledge. Thus, our student identities were never rehearsed or even imagined until we inhabited them (uncomfortably) as adult women with a whole set of previously gendered roles competing for our time and attention.

This discussion of our access to a restricted *gendered* identity opened a dialogue on how gender-typing in working-class culture shapes attitudes toward family, work, and student life. At the same time, the class uncovered a number of distinctions among learning environments -- various settings where different kinds of knowledge are

available to women. Most claimed that formal schooling was the least effective model for learning in their lives, and many reported gaining the academic and professional skills needed to pass school exams, or to advance themselves in the workplace from teachers or friends *off campus*.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the need for formal "credentials" designates the college campus as the official setting where "knowledge" must be acquired and certified (if they want to advance financially and professionally).

The dissonance between home and school cultures was articulated by most of the women through comparisons of "learning from experience" vs. "learning from books," a juxtaposition they suggested described their experience. For example, Julie, sixty-four, and the oldest para in the class, after ten years in college, had accumulated only twenty-six credits, four less than she needed for her Board of Education pay increment. She explained her dilemma with the structure of higher education in a narrative entitled "Actions Speak Louder than Words":

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<sup>7</sup>In *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (1986), the authors found that, "For many women, the real and valued lessons learned do not necessarily grow out of their academic work but in relationships with friends and teachers, life crises, and community involvement" (4)...They conclude, "Women's ways of knowing conflict with what schools value and that education and clinical services, as traditionally defined and practiced, do not adequately serve the needs of women" (4).

I've been working for almost fifty years, twelve of those years I have spent as a paraprofessional. In all of my other work settings, the supermarket, the drug store, the office supply outlet, and the day-care center, I learned by experience and I was judged and rewarded financially by the quality of my work. As a para, I had to get my GED (which took me two years) and take college classes just to keep a job I already knew how to do. I love working with the children in Special Ed....and I'm very good with them...But, on the college campus, I can't find the right words to fill in the god damn blankety blanks on tests. On my final exam in Special Ed. last semester, I couldn't fill in the different categories of special ed. students because I forgot the designations. So, on the back of the sheet, I described a number of children I work with who fit those categories. The professor would not accept my answers -- and I failed the course. I don't need these credits to keep my job, but it seems to me that after twenty-five years of working with children (thirteen in day care, and twelve in the school system), I deserve to be judged and rewarded on whether or not I know the needs of the children I work with, not whether or not I can fill in the blankety-blanks on a college test.

What was most interesting from my perspective as a woman who returned to school with equivalent experience (but with a high school diploma) was Julie's two-year odyssey with the GED. The irrelevance and the irrationality of the para program struck me as a powerful reminder of the ways in which older paras were positioned in the Board of Ed. system due to their age. (Because most working-class women who came of age during World War II, like Julie did, were required to take full-time jobs by economic necessity and lack of male workers to take care of their families, most never completed their high school educations). However, the current GED program provided by the Board of Ed. for paraprofessionals is geared to younger high school dropouts and administered alongside required college classes, making it virtually impossible for these women to manage their college, their GED required classes, their full-time jobs, and their families. The program provides no other means for these women to keep their jobs on the basis of performance or prior life experience (or even work experience in the field of early childhood education). Should women like Julie be in college? Of course, if that is where they want to be. However, should they be forced to complete a GED and eight college credits to keep their jobs, or should the evaluations of supervisors at their job sites and their

rapport with the children be alternative qualifications? In the present system, women like Julie are at the mercy of a "cash cow" between the Board of Education (which pays for their credits) and the community college system (which administers their program).

Julie took composition (despite the disapproval of her academic advisor) because she wanted to take a course that involved "explaining in her own words." She was still struggling with some surface errors and with essay organization, but, she thought (and I agreed) that her ability to develop ideas and use rich details more than compensated for these problems. Yet, she remained at the low end of the para pay scale because she could not connect the official names of categories used to identify childrens' disabilities with her concrete experiences of these same children. Due to her older age and few educational opportunities, Julie represents a special circumstance (most younger paras adjust to the use of technical jargon in their field and move along in the vocational courses). However, like Julie, many paras experience test anxiety and perform poorly on standardized exams because academic culture values ways of knowing and forms of expression that these adult

working women have been prevented from developing.<sup>8</sup>

Their narrative reflections opened a forum for the women to examine the restricted choices of working-class and poor women through the lens of outside sources. At the same time, the infusion of material from their autobiographical accounts illuminated the ways in which their diverse experiences with campus life have been shaped by age, work history, and educational opportunities. In their written assessments of this classroom activity, the most universal response the paras conveyed was "gaining a sense of their own individuality" in relation to the broader aspects of class and culture their journals explored, while at the same time, feeling a sense of "connection with the stories of others." Julie expressed this response most clearly:

One of the most significant benefits I gained from our narrative sessions was hearing aspects of my own story in other people's words and through other people's perspectives. At the same time, being able to feel (and to know) that my experience is not identical to theirs, gave me a sense of my own value in the class. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I learned about "aspects" of my personal history from the experiences

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<sup>8</sup>A discussion of the characteristics of working-class school curricula and its impact on the intellectual development of working-class women appears in Chapter One.

of others and from our readings without having a sense that my own perspectives are wrong. For example, the character Pauline Breedlove is no longer foreign to me -- she is black, I am white, but there are "aspects" of her life that I have lived. I can point to the differences and similarities now in my writing without feeling entangled in them or completely apart from them. I feel that I have something to say about reading material that can include my own experience, but that is not limited to it. That is, my response narratives moved me out of myself without taking "me" out of my writing. I have a certain personal history (with family, work, and education) that created who I am and colors my judgment of issues and I can let others offer me theirs without being judged or passing judgment on them. As working-class women doing a particular job and coming to college, we paras have many things in common. But the most surprising thing I discovered in writing and listening to these narratives was how much we have to offer each other through our differences. Sharing our histories with work and our experiences as women from different cultural backgrounds, different family settings, and different age groups has opened up a new source of knowledge that we can share (especially, in our future college classes).

As Julie's analysis suggests, the reflective narratives offered the paras an opportunity to use writing to explore the connections and distinctions between their own lives and those they encountered in our reading selections. I was particularly impressed by their capacity to enter the world of Morrison's fiction -- juxtaposing their own role conflicts with those of her characters in meaningful and insightful ways (as Carole's narrative on the lack of child-care connected to Pauline Breedlove's dilemma). As their interpretations of their own work histories highlighted their employment progress (both from one generation to the next and from youth to mid-life), their discussions of their current jobs illuminated the value they bring to the lives of the children they serve. Finally, their encounters with some new ideas and perspectives offered in our prose reading prompted them to reflect critically on how their everyday experiences and their present life choices have the power to shape their educational and professional accomplishments in the future.

## Chapter Four

### Three Women: Stories of Everyday Life

#### Introduction

This chapter examines the semester-long autobiographical narratives of three women: Stephanie, a thirty-eight-year-old Italian-American mother of four; Angelica, a forty-two-year-old Hispanic divorced parent with four children; and Cassandra, a thirty-one-year-old single African-American mother of six. I chose these women because their journals illuminate three common composing styles the students used to develop their self-generated narratives. Specifically, each of these women represents one of the three groups of writers that I call "initiators" (Stephanie), "respondents" (Angelica), and "thematic writers" (Cassandra).<sup>1</sup>

Some women, like Stephanie, became "initiators" -- writers whose texts moved smoothly from one topic to another, their themes drawn from their own interests and experiences. Because this group continued to pursue independent lines of inquiry throughout the semester, their

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<sup>1</sup>In this chapter I will discuss how these distinctions are significant in terms of how initiators, respondents, and thematic writers positioned themselves (individually) in relation to the themes they explored in their narratives, which in turn, shaped the kind of responses their narratives elicited from other women in the room.

autobiographical journals provided new and interesting material for classroom dialogue. Although they rarely composed follow-up narratives on recurrent themes, these "initiators" offered insightful verbal comments on other women's texts and became adept at synthesizing material from various sources to illuminate their own themes. Other paras, like Angelica, developed into "respondents" -- writers who gathered material for their autobiographical narratives from topics already under discussion. Because they were informed by classroom dialogue, their texts challenged pre-conceived assumptions and offered multiple levels of inquiry on recurrent themes. Thus, these "respondents" became a valuable resource in my attempts to "re-present" the paras' stories. A third group, represented by Cassandra's narratives, centered their autobiographical journals on a single identity or role conflict in their everyday lives. Thus, their day to day struggle as a "single-mother," an "African-American female," or a "recent immigrant" became the thematic center of their self-generated texts. Unlike the "respondents," whose narratives effectively challenged preconceived assumptions and offered alternative perspectives, the journals of "thematic writers" remained rooted in their own experience. However, these journals were distinguished by vivid accounts of material conditions

and by the writer's effective use of dialogue to invoke compelling images of their thoughts and emotions.

A close reading of the narratives of these three students illuminates the influence of race, ethnicity, age, and marital status on the womens' response to critical pedagogy. At the same time, these samples show that no single narrative style proved most effective -- rather, each approach created a different set of opportunities and limitations that individual writers handled with varying degrees of success. These three representative para texts also highlight how the women used their classroom journals to distinguish themselves as thinkers and writers.

Finally, in place of my teaching journal (which contains more general responses to narratives read in class throughout the semester), I will offer a close reading of some written responses I offered individual students on specific journal entries.

"My Name is Stephanie, and I'm a Para:"  
The Narrative Strategies of an Initiator

Stephanie was one of only a few paras to compose an extensive "self-portrait" on the first day of class. Before I comment on her composing style and themes, I should say that Stephanie is a competent writer, one Mina Shaughnessy would have acknowledged as "an open admissions student who

met the traditional requirements for college work...able to begin at the traditional starting points" (2). Like most initiators,<sup>2</sup> she considered herself to be a long-term initiators, "survivor" in the Ed. Associate Degree Program. Comfortable in her role as a college student and eager to explore the liberal arts curriculum, Stephanie used her autobiographical journals to discuss the intersections of her multiple roles. Her "self-portrait," which she called "My Life as a Multi-functional Mom,"<sup>3</sup> indicated that she the was youngest of five daughters, attended Catholic parochial school for twelve years, and then worked in her Uncle Mike's deli as a cashier until her first child was born. At age thirty-eight, Stephanie had been married for twenty years and was the mother of four children aged eleven to seventeen. Her husband, a self-employed electrician, was born and raised in Sicily but spoke English as his primary language at home. The family lived (along with two of Stephanie's married sisters and their families) in a four-unit house in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn which was owned and also occupied by her parents.

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<sup>2</sup>Initiators thought of themselves (and were considered by their peers) to be the most successful and upwardly mobile paras. High G.P.A.'s, good communication skills and problem-solving strategies, combined with an air of self-confidence distinguished them as the group most likely to earn a four-year degree.

<sup>3</sup>See appendix A for a sample of Stephanie's semester-long autobiographical narratives.

This "self-portrait" offered a narrative approach that Stephanie continued to develop throughout the semester -- one that identified the intersections of her roles and explained the coping strategies she employed to accommodate the demands in her life:

I'm a blissfully happy thirty-eight-year-old Italian-American wife and mother of four. I love being a wife and mother, but, as a "multi-functional mom," my days are busy, divided into three separate lists of things that need to be done -- one for home, one for work, and one for school. Although work and school complicate my life, they also add a lot to the well-being of my family -- like the second income I earn as a para and the new ideas I come across as a college student.

In this brief introductory passage, Stephanie identified her primary gender roles (wife and mother), introduced her auxiliary roles (worker and student), indicated the context through which she would discuss them (the tasks and duties she ascribed to each), and explained the relationships among them in terms of how the auxiliary roles supported and enhanced her primary domestic identities. However, this positive portrayal of her everyday life is contradicted by

another voice that emerged in the body of the narrative -- one that painstakingly detailed the mundane and time-consuming duties Stephanie performed each day in various settings. She concluded this journal by stating that her multiple identities construct her as "a human extension cord on overload."

Although I was impressed by Stephanie's capacity to incorporate many aspects of her life into this "self-portrait" (something most of the women did not attempt to do), I was also struck by the boundaries she erected among her multiple identities. The long lists of role-related tasks clearly illuminated her social construction as a *silent facilitator* and her understanding of everyday life as a series of separate worlds she inhabits (sequentially). Most notably, when I asked Stephanie (in class) to explain how she moved from a "blissfully happy wife and mother" to an "overloaded household appliance" in a brief (two-page) narrative, she had to re-read her text and canvass the room to verify that the paras had drawn the same conclusion as the teacher. Then she said (defensively):

You people interpreted this journal a lot more negatively than I meant it. After all, my husband agreed that I could go to work and attend college on

the condition that none of it would interfere with my roles at home. I'm only living up to that agreement.

Although this type of "male restriction" imposed on "female mobility" outside the home was universally understood by all the women in the room (their comments and follow-up narratives spoke of strategies they, themselves, used to make their non-domestic outside roles "invisible" to the family), I wanted to know more about the conditions and agreements Stephanie saw as operative in her conflicts between domestic life and her roles outside the home. Specifically, I responded to her "self-portrait" with three questions: How do you prioritize your roles? Has anything changed at home since you returned to work? If so, explain. Do you set aside a specific time to study? These questions led Stephanie to more narrative reflections on her domestic situation -- ranging from detailed analysis of specific conversations that took place among family members prior to her return to work and school to a more general discussion of mandates about her role in the home imposed by her husband before, during, and after her transition from housewife to working mother and college student. In brief, these journal entries summarized "conditions" she agreed to in advance such as, "the kids and the housework come first,

no matter what." The tone of these explicit and detailed entries reminded me of the restrictive female conditions Lillian B. Rubin<sup>4</sup> encountered more than twenty years ago in her study of working-class couples. For example, Rubin recounts the story of one young mother who wanted to become a teacher and sought her husband's approval to go to college (part-time) while their children were at school:

I keep telling him that it wouldn't make any difference in the house. I'd still get all my work done. It wouldn't interfere with anything -- not the housework, the cooking, the meals, or the kids...He wouldn't even know I was gone (179-180).

The husband explained his objections to Rubin, saying, "I don't want her to work and I don't want her to go to school. What for? She doesn't have to. She's got plenty to keep her busy right here" (180). Essentially, Stephanie's explanation of her "domestic agreement" paraphrased a text on working-class culture that she had never read (but she knew the script quite well). The only difference between Stephanie's domestic situation and that of the couple Rubin

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<sup>4</sup>See Lillian Rubin's *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (1992). Originally published in 1976.

interviewed more than twenty years ago was that Stephanie's husband, Gary, supported his wife's roles as worker and student -- so long as family life *appeared* unchanged. Thus, she explained in her conclusion to this long, detailed explanation of her domestic arrangements that she "works" to maintain the "status quo" at home by erasing all evidence of the "work" she does "outside the home." "By keeping things running well at home," she wrote, "I have freedom to do what I want outside. It's just a little more *hairy* sometimes."

Stephanie's autobiographical journals also illuminated a number of role conflicts embedded in her extended-family living arrangement. For example, she wrote a series of narratives on (adult) sibling rivalry and parental interference in relationships between parents and children. Specifically, a in journal entitled "Living With the Whole Family," Stephanie highlighted the intense negotiation with her parents and siblings over her right to work as a para and attend college:

My sisters both work at uncle Mike's deli, so that was never really a family issue. But, since I had always been active in the PTA (an unpaid position), I wanted to become a para and go to college...and I had to convince them that this choice would enable me to

supplement our family's income without my leaving the neighborhood.

In a written response to this narrative, I asked Stephanie what role her husband played in these family negotiations and she said, "None, arguments with Gary came later and were mainly over housework, not working outside the home." Although I was struck by the inter-generational power-relations portrayed in this narrative, even more surprising [to me] was the conclusion Stephanie drew in this narrative:

Of course, it's hard to have so many other people involved in every decision you make in life (sometimes it makes me feel like a "big kid"), but like most families in my neighborhood, we have to live together, so we have to make the best of it and try to get along.<sup>5</sup>

Stephanie's composing style, which seemed [to me] painstaking detailed, even tedious, at times, was successful in its capacity to directly connect the metaphors she

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<sup>5</sup>Stephanie's assessment of her family as "the norm" is supported in Marianna De Marco Torgovick's literacy narrative *Crossing Ocean Parkway*. Torgovick describes the working-class community of Bensonhurst as "a place where adult children still live together with parents and grandparents..in neat but anonymous two-, three-, or four-family houses...because they need the rent" (2).

initiated in her original "self-portrait" ("multi-functional mom" and "extension cord on overload") to her later discussions of her extended family. Thus, thematically, Stephanie used her narratives to explore a variety of perspectives on domestic life -- in particular, those that provoked inter-generational conflicts. For example, in a narrative entitled "Doing it All," her mother's frequent use of the phrase, "one mother can take care of five children, but five children cannot take care of one mother" was juxtaposed with Stephanie's vision of herself as a "multi-functional mom." This narrative began as a "justification" of women working outside the home (in terms of current economic conditions that make it necessary and time-saving electrical appliances that make it possible). However, the theme of "care-taking" took on a more complex and complete meaning in her conclusion which argued:

The role of the modern adult daughter (who drives parents to their appointments and brings home an income to pay their fuel bills in the winter) may not seem as devoted to care-taking as it was in previous generations because her physical presence in her parent's home is interrupted by work. But, it's really just a change in society's definition of care-taking.

From another perspective, one of the most significant contributions Stephanie's narratives brought to the class was her capacity to articulate attitudes and behaviors that the women already shared (which prompted other paras to use their journals to reflect on role conflicts). However, I also noted that her writing consistently fostered the impression that working-class women (universally) take jobs outside the home to supplement the family's income, not to support the family. I was surprised that no one initially challenged Stephanie's conception of women's roles in the workforce as "auxiliary" to their domestic roles. Thus, Stephanie's early narratives offered a perspective on the relationships among the multiple roles of working-class women that the paras appeared at this point in time to accept without question.

Although I did question her assumption that her lifestyle represented working-class women in my written feedback on her narratives, Stephanie responded with her own definition of "working-class" as "working-families" -- she said she believed that single-mothers belonged to another class category -- what she called "the working poor."

## Composing Family Life

Stephanie's narratives on domestic life vividly captured the everyday transactions and negotiations among family members. The paras enjoyed her humorous, interesting, and often episodic journals which rendered a series of incidents (and insights) that emerged over time from a single event. For example, she wrote a series of narratives on sharing what she called "The Family Estate" with her parents, married sisters and their families. These journals rendered accounts of sibling rivalry and solidarity, coping with aging parents, and taking care of other people's children (nieces and nephews). She also wrote some humorous journal entries on "the five husbands" whom she called "in-laws and outlaws in the clan." Stephanie's narratives on living with her extended family also generated critical inquiry into age-related role conflicts. In particular, one narrative entitled "Taking Care of Mom," examined the meaning (and the irony) of adult sibling rivalry. Stephanie wrote, "It's ironic that while we were growing up, we fought over mom's attention. Now, we are always fighting over who will take care of mom because everyone is busy with husbands, kids, jobs, and domestic chores."

Being the youngest of five sisters, I was the last to

get married. Because I didn't leave home (physically), it seemed as if my role as the dutiful daughter should remain the same giving my older sisters freedom to live their lives without worry over mom and dad. But my role did change as Gary and the kids took up more and more of my time. I resent them [my sisters] thinking that their lives should go on as if I was the only daughter. Even my oldest sister who lives upstairs from us just takes off whenever she pleases expecting me to stay home with the older generation.

Stephanie's self-assessment of her role in the extended family as being restricted by birth-order, living arrangements, and sibling rivalry illuminates an important distinction between adult working-women who come to college with family responsibilities (and histories as care-takers of aging parents) and those of younger working-class students. On one hand, their campus experience disrupts a set of cultural and class-based assumptions about their domestic roles (as evidenced by Stephanie's interrogation of the complex meanings of "care-taking" in her narrative "Doing it All"). On the other hand, these women literally remain "at home" surrounded by people who resist the slightest change in the "status quo." Thus, the inter-

generational and sibling conflicts that emerged in Stephanie's narratives on family life show that coming to college later in life restricts women's choices and disrupts a long-standing pattern of family relationships. Unlike the "Scholarship Boys and Girls" who moved away from home (not only gaining access to more personal freedom, but also to new perspectives on family life), these women come home each night to a family setting where particular ways of doing things and a specific set of familial relationships are strictly enforced by those around them.

Despite the conflicted nature of Stephanie's narratives on family life, though, all the paras agreed that her writing introduced issues of great interest and concern. The classroom dialogue that followed her narratives also prompted other women to submit articles on aging parents and adult siblings as reading material for their reflective narratives.

My written comments on Stephanie's assessment of her inter-generational and sibling conflicts acknowledged her feelings of resentment and frustration, while at the same time, I offered her some thoughts on practical solutions -- which included taking the spotlight off of her college attendance and challenging her older sisters on behalf of her parents' needs -- including the need for a close

relationship with all of their daughters, not just those living under their roof.

Although Stephanie continued to initiate new topics for narratives on domestic life, she consistently described "The Family" from the limited perspective of the two parent/two income household -- as if no alternative configurations existed. Specifically, the habitual use of the phrase "like most families" to preface her remarks eventually became a source of conflict among the women.<sup>6</sup> For example, in a journal entitled "Families in Transition," she wrote, "Like most families, ours is in the process of changing from the familiar traditional model (with a working father and a stay-at-home mother) to the more complicated modern version (with two working parents)." In addition to the narrow characterization of the family as either "traditional" or "modern," this text revealed Stephanie's assumption that her experiences were shared by all other paras in the room. Like many of the women interviewed in *Women's Ways of Knowing*,<sup>7</sup> Stephanie believed that she and her peers "share exactly the same thoughts and experiences" (38). To be

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<sup>6</sup>The paras response to Stephanie's limited concept of "family" will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, as it became an issue for critical discussion when the narratives of Angelica (a divorced parent) and Cassandra (a single mother) contradicted Stephanie's vision of the two-parent household as the "norm" of family life.

<sup>7</sup>The authors characterize this group of women as "received knowers"

specific about the ambivalence these remarks generated among the paras, I can report on one of Stephanie's most memorable journals that recounted a holiday scene in which a turkey stuffed with homemade chestnut dressing *disappeared* from the kitchen. (It was pushed off the counter and out the open window by the family dog, who ran outside, consumed the stuffing and left the remains of the bird in the driveway). "When I didn't see the turkey on the counter," Stephanie wrote, "I thought I had put it back in the oven...By the time we found the 'mangled carcass' in the driveway, it was too late to cook, so we ended up eating out." The domestic scenes that erupted from this episode were the subject of a few subsequent journals on the mis-adventures of "Max" (the dog), "ripping the furniture"...defecating on the living-room rug...and barking incessantly." Although everyone laughed throughout the reading of these amusing stories, the women's comments revealed their discomfort with what they called "domestic trivia." Some asked, "What's the point,?" while others wanted to know why Stephanie didn't just "get rid of the dog." A few wrote response narratives that they shared only with me, stories that juxtaposed their own domestic circumstances with Stephanie's. For example, Cassandra (whose semester long-narratives will be discussed later in this chapter) created a hypothetical holiday scene

in which her turkey was stolen by thugs in her housing project. She ended with the statement, "Our turkey was gone, and we couldn't afford to go out to eat." Because I felt that these responses would offer the women an alternative view of family life, I urged Cassandra (and others) to share these journals with the class. However, at this point, most of the paras were still engaged in producing texts they felt comfortable reading aloud -- journals that "sounded" like the ones initiators produced -- that is, stories the paras appeared to relate to and enjoy.<sup>8</sup>

For Stephanie, the paras' questions and comments provided an opening for a more serious journal she shared a few days later -- an account of a family meeting at which consensus was reached between her husband and her children that the dog was "acting out" because Stephanie was no longer at home to "take care of him properly." When other paras asked how she responded to this ridiculous conversation and incredible conclusion, Stephanie replied,

I didn't say a word ...I kept silent because I figure the dog has another five or six years left in

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<sup>8</sup>With regard to pedagogy, my primary goal at this early stage of narrative writing was the paras' production of written material and adaptation to speaking in class. Thus, although I was eager to engage them in critical dialogue and multiple perspectives on their themes, I decided to allow more reticent writers and speakers space to make their own judgments on and connections with the main themes under discussion.

him...time enough for me to earn my degree and get my teaching license...If that's all my family complains about for the next few years, then Max has served a definite purpose...

This remark led the women to a discussion of the role of *silence* in their domestic lives. Most reported that they often said "nothing" even when saying "something" seemed natural. As Janice explained, "You have to pick your battles and make them few and far between or you end up short-circuiting your long-term goals for short-term satisfaction." The paras' interpretation of silence as a "tool" of female agency rather than a "condition" of female social construction surprised me because it complicates some of the feminist research on *silent women*. For instance, the paras' perspective on silence as a deliberate response to their subordination conflicts with the conclusions drawn by the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* who describe *silence* as "Feeling Deaf and Dumb," (24) "Experiencing Disconnection," (25) "Obeying the Wordless Authorities," (27) "Maintaining the Woman's Place," (29) and "Being Seen But Never Heard" (32).<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the paras considered

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<sup>9</sup>In their later book *Knowledge, Difference, and Power*, Nancy Goldberger, one of the co-authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* came to the conclusion that the uses of silence are more complex, "Not as simple nor necessarily as passive as we initially described in *WWK*..." (351).

Stephanie's use of what she called "strategic silence" at home as a powerful response which allowed her to avoid confrontation as she moved from "silent facilitator" in the family to "working-mother" at her school job site to "aspiring professional" on the college campus. Similar perspectives on "strategic silence" continued to emerge in the women's narrative accounts of home, work, and school providing insight on how working-class women construct borders between their need to voice their immediate opinions and their desire to achieve their long-term goals.<sup>10</sup>

Having dealt with this domestic episode and offered her views on the use of strategic silence, Stephanie initiated narrative themes that took the class into other settings. Although her husband and children reappeared frequently in these journals on work and campus life, the domestic scenes were brief and more clearly focused on how she overcame the many obstacles of being a "Multi-Functional Mom."

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However, Goldberger recasts the position of silence among women in the contexts of past experience (with domestic violence) and cultural conditioning (factoring in the cultural meanings of deference to external authority). That is, silence as a function of "keeping their reflective and defiant selves underground" (350). She did not address silence as a conscious choice women make to facilitate their actions.

<sup>10</sup>To clarify my position on the paras' perspectives on silence, I should say that the use of "strategic silence" does not negate the psychological impact of imposed silence in the lives of working-class women. Rather, their interpretation of their own silence offers insight into how they view the impact (and the use) of silence in their lives.

Stories of Para Culture:  
Stephanie's Life in School

Stephanie offered one of the first narratives on para culture. This journal entitled "Getting to First Base" described the various relationships (both hierarchical and horizontal) that structure her job site:

...There are three separate kinds of relationships for paras, the teacher-para, the para-child, and the para-para and each one requires a different type of behavior and communication skills. Getting to first base in the school system means learning how to adjust to each one, but after a while, it becomes natural. The teacher-para relationship can be very helpful, if you learn how to pattern your behavior and your speech after the teacher's, that is, to deal with the children as she does, which often contradicts what you learn in college. Then there are the kids. You need to be nice, but not too nice, which means being careful not to take the teacher's place in their hearts. Then there are the other paras. That is, getting along with your "boss" and speaking "well" can make it difficult to get along with other paras. To avoid this conflict, I act

like I don't care too much about Ms. "C" and her class.

I was immediately drawn to the different behavior patterns and language practices Stephanie assigned to various aspects of her job and I was also curious about her assumption that this type of conduct code "becomes natural." In my comments on this narrative, I asked her, "Why create different rules for each relationship,? How did you learn these patterns of behavior? How do you benefit from using them?" Stephanie wrote a brief reply, "It's common sense, isn't it? You look around, watch what goes on at your job, and you learn how to behave in various situations."

However, these behavior codes (and their job-related consequences) surfaced again in a moving and revealing journal entitled "Facilitating Emily" that described Stephanie's daily experiences with an autistic child for whom she served as a (keyboard) communication facilitator. She wrote:

Since keyboard facilitation is a relatively new practice in the school system, no one really knows if autistic children like Emily are communicating or being led by the facilitator's hands Sometimes I think (to

myself) that she is speaking my unconscious thoughts for her, but sometimes I sense a spark of recognition in her eyes. However, no one asks me what I think, and I'm not sure I could give a real opinion if they did, so, I'm glad I don't have to evaluate Emily's progress.

This narrative highlighted Stephanie's habituation into the "behavior codes" she had been socialized to view as "natural." Silenced on the job as well as at home with the family, Stephanie saw her relationship with Emily as one that must facilitate the existing practice of key-boarding for autistic children. Although she stated that "no one really knows if autistic children like Emily are communicating or just being led by the facilitators hand," she went on to suggest that the professionals are equipped to evaluate the child's progress, while she is not. As Elisabeth Johnson, a former nurse who came to college at forty-seven and went on to earn a Ph.D. in social psychology explains:

Nursing and similar sub-professional fields teach their students and workers not to have opinions. One can describe what one sees but must not draw conclusions ...This institutionalized subservience has the effect

of making a person feel that her ideas are unworthy (202).

My response to this narrative (a brief inquiry about how Stephanie perceived her role as a keyboard facilitator if she did not see any visible progress in her student). This statement provoked a lengthy written response on the importance of paraprofessionals in the lives of handicapped school children. She concluded her reply to me with the statement:

Regardless of whether or not I m qualified to assess Emily's progress, I do [for her] what no teacher can do. I offer her individual attention and companionship at school. Her educational and social world would be empty if not for me. Therefore, my role is important, even though it is not recognized as such by others in the school system.

I found this response both interesting and revealing in terms of Stephanie's evaluation of her role in the classroom. First, it represented a rare departure from the paras' perception of their job as "teacher's aides" because it distinguished her role from that of a teacher --

acknowledging that, as a para, her relationship with Emily was separate, distinct, and necessary. Second, it clearly articulated the value Stephanie assigned to her job. In a subsequent verbal exchange about communication facilitation, Stephanie told me that she had responded "defensively" to my question because communication facilitators are under attack by some administrators because the one-to-one procedure is not considered "cost effective" if it cannot produce "measurable progress." She told me, "In my opinion, they are not asking the right questions and they are not measuring the right things." This exchange led to other narratives on Emily that stressed "aspects of progress" she (as the operative force in communication facilitation) might bring to the attention of school administrators in the future.

Although Stephanie's focus on a particular activity she performed at her job site limited her narrative exploration of para culture (in comparison to the more expansive accounts of peer relationships, para-teacher associations, etc., that she introduced in her first account of the school workplace, it also provided her with valuable insights into the value of the work she performed as a para -- something I don't think she really appreciated until she articulated it in writing.

Coming to College at Thirty-Something:  
Stephanie's Campus Experience

Stephanie introduced her first narrative on campus life, "Coming to College at Thirty-Something," with a report on her previous attempts to gain access to higher education. "Unlike many Italian men," she wrote, "my father was absolutely delighted to have five daughters because it meant no college tuition and six women at home to cook and clean for him." Like M. Bella Mirabella, whose Italian working-class parents told her, "Women don't need to go to college because they get married" (167), Stephanie was expected to work and help support the family until she found a "suitable Italian-American man to marry her" (168). In her narrative she explained:

When I finished high school at seventeen, I wanted to go to college, but I went to work at uncle Mike's deli handing over my paycheck to papa...Three years later when I got married, he used the money I gave him to make 'The Wedding' (a huge catered affair) at which he bragged to all the relatives, "For all our daughters we provided the very best"...But college? It was not in the future my parents planned for me...

My response to this narrative focused on her last sentence. I asked Stephanie if she had any plans for herself, and if so, did they conflict with those of her parents? This question prompted Stephanie's narrative on her high school experience with the guidance counselor.<sup>11</sup> Of particular interest [to me] was Stephanie's [adult] interpretation of her situation in adolescence. She acknowledged the "difference" between her the response of her working-class parents (who did not act on her behalf) and that of her middle-class friends whose parents valued higher education for their daughters (and acted accordingly). But she did not actively pursue her own educational interests (as Scholarship Boys and Girls reported doing). I wanted to know why, at age seventeen (when she was young, unmarried, and childless), she didn't just take a course in algebra over the summer and go to college? She said:

It just seemed that too many things were against me at that time and I knew that my parents were glad to have the "college issue" settled by the school system.

This response illuminates another distinction between my adult women students and some of the less promising students

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<sup>11</sup>See Chapter Two (pp. 123-124).

among the "Scholarship Boys and Girls." For example, Victor Villanueva quite literally pulled himself up by his "Bootstraps" -- trudging his way through remedial courses at a community college and beating down the doors of the senior college and graduate school). By contrast, Stephanie,<sup>12</sup> walked away from higher education at the first sign of rejection. I asked her if she had as many regrets as I do about abandoning her college plans so quickly. She said, "No, I'm here now and that's what counts."

In her next narrative on campus life, Stephanie moved on to her current situation, focusing on the study strategies she developed to incorporate higher education into her domestic setting. Specifically, she composed a three part series of narratives: The first, "Keeping House," offered a variety of study strategies (like taping index cards to the splashboard above the kitchen sink).<sup>13</sup> The second, "Keeping Quiet," briefly re-visited her previous narratives on "Max," expanding her ideas on the strategic use of silence in response to criticism. However, the most

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<sup>12</sup>Stephanie's story of walking away from higher education because of a minor obstacle is representative of approximately one-third of the women in the room (including myself). Clearly, patriarchy in working-class culture (and the fact that the recent women's movement was barely underway at the time) played a role in our complicity with the operative forces of culture and society. However, it seems that our own choice (whether being unable or unwilling to seize that one moment in time) like the "Scholarship Boys and Girls" changed the course of our lives and limited our future life choices.

<sup>13</sup>See Chapter Two

interesting part of this narrative on "Keeping Quiet" juxtaposed the cultural interpretations of "silence" at home:

For an Italian-American woman, being silent in response to criticism is one thing, but asking for silence (dropping out of conversation) is another. That is, "not talking back" is a good thing while "not talking" is a bad thing. Coming to college has made me long for silent time all to myself, time to study, or read, or write, or even just to think. Finding a quiet place to be alone in my house is one of my long-term educational and professional goals.

I responded (at some length) to this particular passage because it offered a new perspective on her use of "strategic silence" at home. In brief, I wanted to know how she distinguished these forms of silence and how she kept the conversation going when she was obviously distracted by school work. In a follow-up narrative entitled "Knowing Inside Out," Stephanie explained how she is on "automatic pilot" in conversations with Gary. "I know what he's going to say before he thinks of it and I can be doing a million other things during our conversations -- including school

work."

In the third offering in this series, "Keeping Italian Traditions," Stephanie discussed some immediate obstacles she faced as an adult student with a full-time job and a family. In particular, she addressed the labor-intensive, time-consuming, and gendered rituals of Italian-American culture:

Italian holiday traditions and Catholic religious rituals do not include any time for women to study for final exams in December (probably because we women are supposed to be in the kitchen cooking the ravioli). ...The worst part of this conflict between home and school at this time of year is watching my sisters (who also work for a living) doing everything so well at home, enjoying the extra cooking and baking, the last minute shopping, and the Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. For me, Christmas Eve is "recovery time" after a week of final exams. I just want everyone to go home.

Since Stephanie volunteered to read these three narrative episodes aloud, she received extensive feedback from other women in the room. Nine out of ten responded to her

assessment of campus life as having more to do with her domestic conflicts than with her experiences on the college campus, I disagreed. Although they were written from the perspective of her domestic life, the central theme of these narratives emerged from impediments of class and gender to Stephanie's intellectual growth and professional development. Therefore, I asked Stephanie [in class] to explain how her family's resistance to her role as a student affects her academic progress. She said,

School is the one part of my life that I can't share at home. They don't relate to it and they don't see what I get out of it. The more classes I take, the more I resent their negative attitudes about education and the more they resent me for my changing attitudes about it. So, I see my family as holding me back and they see me as running away from them and their ideas about life.

Stephanie's assessment of her situation was shared by only two other women (Joan and Margaret). Essentially, the rest of the class was divided on the cause of her domestic conflict. Two or three women suggested [aloud] that Stephanie took herself and her school work "too seriously." As Valerie pointed out, "College means getting a credential

and getting on with your life. Once you get your degree the problems over college will die down." Others could not understand Stephanie's need for approval at home, some saying "You don't need to prove yourself to anyone at home, it's none of their business." Still others suggested that Stephanie develop closer relationships with peers (other paras or friends on campus) instead of depending on her family for support. For example, Cassandra said, "You can't expect people with no education to understand what education means to you. You have to depend on people who share your interests and experiences." Although Stephanie and I saw an infinite number of connections between her family conflicts and her student role, the consensus of the class was that Stephanie wrote too many narratives about her family. However, everyone agreed that her narratives generated lively discussion and offered a great deal of material to them to explore in their own journals.

Towards the end of the class each para composed a reflection on her journals in which she interpreted her own experience with this semester-long activity. Stephanie's evaluation of her autobiographical productions emphasized her difficulty with what she called the "spontaneity" of in-class journal writing. She expressed her frustration with the multiple themes that emerged in her narratives:

There's never enough time to explain the ideas I introduce. So, I find myself composing "follow-up episodes" to expand on my original thoughts even though sometimes I would rather move on to new topics raised in class.

At our student-teacher conference, I asked Stephanie why she felt compelled to *finish* every theme she mentioned in her journals. Her successful adaptation to school-based literacy was evident in her reply: "I guess it's because I still believe that readers (or listeners in class) expect a story to have a beginning, a middle, and an end." She also acknowledged that she wrote ongoing episodes because "Only a few paras take risks on new topics...the others just use 'old' material to offer comments and criticisms." Although Stephanie saw the emergence of multiple themes in her journals as "ideas that needed completion," I saw them as possibilities for broader discussion, not necessarily as unfinished narratives. Thus, I suggested that rather than illuminating "incomplete themes," the paras' follow-up responses to her journals revealed their interest in her subject matter and their desire to model their own texts after a well-written and thoughtful theme.

Responding to Other Voices:  
Angelica's Narratives

Angelica, a recently divorced forty-two-year-old Hispanic mother of four, came to my freshman writing class after struggling through six semesters at various levels of the basic writing curriculum. Unlike Stephanie, who positioned herself at the center of the class and voiced her opinions freely (and frequently), Angelica entered the room stealthily from the rear door, pushed a desk to the back left corner of the classroom where she sat in silence throughout the heated debate over the syllabus and the course requirements.<sup>14</sup> Although I noticed that she generated a substantial "composite sketch" (the list of characteristics and social roles the women used to develop their "self-portraits"), Angelica appeared overwhelmed by the task of spontaneously synthesizing this information into narrative form. Like many "respondents," she later reported difficulty choosing *particular* attributes from her list and *organizing* them into a coherent written statement. Thus, her brief "self-portrait" -- which read "I became a para to

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<sup>14</sup>In *When Students Have Power*, Ira Shor (1996) notes the tendency of working-class students to enact what he calls "Siberia Syndrome," that is, "Their learned habit of automatically filling the distant corners first, representing their subordinate and silent position, which drives them to seek the remote seats of any classroom they inhabit" (12). Among the paras, "respondents" (like Angelica) would be recognized as "the deep Siberians," or those Shor calls "more aggressively in exile than others" (12-13).

supplement my family's income and I came to Kingsborough to supplement my para paycheck" circumvented her composite list and offered, instead, a new set of "facts." Unfortunately, the class never heard this written statement because, being one of the last paras to share her "self-portrait," Angelica decided to "fake it"<sup>15</sup> -- by ad-libbing a narrative that sounded like those which came before. After class, she explained to me that she felt "intimidated" by what she called "the longer, more interesting writings of the others." (I would later learn that Angelica's assessment of these "others" was based on a "pecking order" that had gradually developed among the women themselves during their long-term odyssey in the vocational curriculum). Isolated in special "para classes," compared solely to each other, the women experienced a learning environment that silenced some, like Angelica, while it developed others, like Stephanie, into speakers (and advocates) for the entire group.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>The term "fake it" is taken from Angelica's assessment of the situation. She said, "Sorry, I 'faked it' because I knew I had done the assignment 'wrong' and I was embarrassed to read what I had actually written." Moreover, she seemed startled and confused by my observation that her "self-portrait" wasn't "wrong," but rather, potentially even more interesting than those she had "imitated" because it provided a new perspective for the "self-portraits" -- one that raised the issue of who the paras are and why they are in college.

<sup>16</sup>Years of "banking education" and confinement to special "para sections" at the college had socialized the women to believe that every question had a "right" answer and to assume that only a few women in the group were likely to know it. Thus, one of the most challenging aspects of introducing critical pedagogy to this group was the process of dispelling their belief in singular "right" answers and simultaneously disrupting a set of social relations among them that assumed

Like one third of the paras who developed into "respondents," Angelica took notes during discussions of other women's narratives and used her journals to offer alternative viewpoints. Throughout the semester, she continued to develop a writing/speaking strategy by which she would read a few lines from her journal, pause, "fill in the blanks" (verbally), and then continue reading.<sup>17</sup> From these oral communications, I learned that she was born in Puerto Rico, came to New York at age twelve, married at fourteen, and gave birth to four sons before her eighteenth birthday. She spoke what she called "a la inglesa" (in the English fashion) at home because her ex-husband wanted the boys to be successful Americans, not, what he called "ignorant immigrants." Angelica also explained that because she grew up in a relatively remote part of the island, she attended school only sporadically in Puerto Rico -- up to the sixth grade when she came to New York. To my surprise, she told the class that she never enrolled in the New York City school system and that no one (officially) noticed this

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access to knowledge for only the privileged few.

<sup>17</sup>With regard to classroom practice, I did not discourage this strategy (which was common among "respondents") for two reasons. First, it served as a corrective for the paras' previous experiences with banking education which prevented many from developing into confident speakers and competent writers. Second, the act of verbally amending and expanding their texts while reading allowed everyone (even those whose texts were brief) sufficient time to be heard, which in turn, prevented the more willing speakers and prolific writers from dominating classroom discourse.

fact. "In the early 60's," she said, "it wasn't hard for a Puerto-Rican girl living in the South Bronx to escape the school system and get a job in the garment center."

In her first full-length narrative entitled "Being a Strong Woman," Angelica used Stephanie's "extension-cord" metaphor to launch her own analysis of role-related duties that concluded with a personal assessment of her multiple roles and coined her own metaphor:

As Stephanie proved, being wife, mother, worker, and student involves a lot of daily tasks -- but, I'd rather be an "extension cord on overload" than a "two-socket wall plug" that's stuck in the same place.

I noted with interest that Angelica's perspective on being a working-mother and college student recapitulated Stephanie's assumption that the *paras* chose to work and study outside the home (in addition to performing all the "daily tasks" of a full-time wife and mother). In a written response to this narrative, I asked Angelica to comment more extensively on on this "choice" (between the mobile extension-cord and the stationary wall-socket) in light of her personal perspective as a single mother. In a follow-up narrative entitled "Choosing to Work," Angelica related some stories about

other single mothers on welfare. Although heavily slanted toward negative stereotypes of "welfare mothers," this narrative stressed independence and the opportunity for upward mobility as the most concrete rewards of choosing work over welfare:

The mobile-extension cord can move (upward as well as sideways), while the stationary wall socket goes nowhere. I didn't choose to become a single-mother, most women do not make this choice. But, I do see working and getting an education as a choice, an option in my life. The daily tasks I perform at home are not an option, but a necessity. Doing the laundry, cooking the meals, going shopping -- these are the normal everyday things that women (and many men) do each day. For me, work and school are a choice that I hope will bring me rewards in the future. I don't resent doing them in addition to what is necessary at home. In fact, they set me free from conditions at home and get me out of myself and my problems. So, even now, I benefit from this choice.

Thus, Angelica re-enforced her perspective that the "extension cord" offered a better life than the "two-plug

wall socket" despite the double-duty she endures, but she did not acknowledge any other choices that might be available to women. Specifically, she described her situation (as a working woman who cannot afford household help or child-care services) as the universal condition of women.

Composing La Familia:  
Angelica's Home Life

The independence women acquire through work outside the home and through access to higher education became a recurrent theme in Angelica's responses to journals on domestic life. For one thing, she was no stranger to the trials and tribulations of living with an extended family -- her husband's family. Of particular interest to the class was her response to Stephanie's series of narratives on "The Family Estate" in which Angelica juxtaposed Stephanie's position as a daughter with her own situation as a daughter-in-law:

Because I spent the first five years of my married life in the same house with the older generation (my in-laws), I can relate to what Stephanie called her inter-generational conflicts...I also felt like "a big kid,

but also a bad kid, a stupid kid." When you have a baby at 15 and move into your mother-in-laws' apartment, what are you?...You are the "problem" that ruined her son's life, that's what you are. Also, for me, the "older generation" was still in their thirties, still having babies of their own. So, my first-born son didn't even have a high-chair or a carriage to call his own, he shared them with his uncle, my mother-in-laws new baby.

Angelica's story of early marriage (and closer age proximity to the "older generation") offered a new perspective on living among extended family members. My written comments focused on the problems of living with in-laws who resented her presence in their house. I wanted to know more about her experience as an "outsider" in her mother-in-law's house. Angelica did not respond immediately to my question, and she remained silent throughout a heated classroom discussion of "family values" and "cultural traditions" that emerged when she read this narrative aloud in class. However, later in the semester, Angelica came back to this theme when she composed another narrative called "Family Ties" in which she addressed some of the cultural and matrimonial customs of her native Puerto Rico:

Family ties are always seen differently from the outside, especially those that conflict with the "norms" of where you are living at any given time. For example, the ties among aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews who are the same age can be confusing to strangers (outside of my Puerto Rican culture), but not to my family. Stephanie wrote about her family (which seems normal to her), but it could be seen from outside as just as "unstable" because adult children are never allowed to grow up, they live always with their parents and never become independent and self-sufficient. In my family, we moved on as soon as our finances got better. Finally, I have to say that teenage marriage was the "norm" among Puerto Ricans when I was growing up, but it is not considered so for my children's generation. My oldest son is twenty-eight, my youngest is twenty-four -- both graduated from college and neither one is in a rush to get married or make me 'l'abuela' (a grandma). They are busy building "The American Dream."

In a written response to this narrative, I asked Angelica about her reference to "The American Dream." Although the narrative seemed to suggest that her family had gone through

a process of separation from their native culture and assimilation into the "norms" she noticed in Stephanie's narrative, I was not sure whether she saw this change as a sign of cultural separation and assimilation or if she was referring to changes in Puerto Rican culture, itself, from one generation to another. I asked her if the "norms" on the island with regard to early marriage had also changed over the past thirty years. She answered this question in an insightful and beautiful narrative entitled "Being in Puerto Rico and Living in the United States:"

Life in Puerto Rico is just being. You are the person you are and you do whatever you do to make your life. In the U.S. it is more like living, that is earning a living and you have to do everything you can do to earn a living. There is no slow pace here as people are always running and pushing to get ahead...In the U.S. you work long days and need to buy a lot of goods and material things like washing machines and color T.V. and to own a car. But it is also true that just being in Puerto Rico makes a sameness of life that limits who you can become, you really have no future there because the future will be just the same as the present and the past. Nothing moves for you and you remain always in

the same place. In the U.S. you have the opportunity to be different next year than you are now. Having children young holds you back. I mean to advance yourself and your status in the world. You can grow through your work and education, which is not really available in small places like Puerto Rico where the "norms" do not change and neither do you.

In a subsequent discussion of this narrative, Angelica explained the idea of "being" as not finding a need to "plan" -- and this, she said, included family planning. Although her narratives clearly show the value Angelica places on access to wider professional and educational opportunities,<sup>18</sup> this conversation illuminated a dissonance between the cultural values of her native Puerto Rico and the expectations of her adopted culture in the U.S. -- as the last words she said to me on the subject indicate: "I will be old before I hear the beautiful sound "l'abuela" from a little one because my American children do not value family as much as material possessions."

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<sup>18</sup>Her narratives on campus life (discussed below) provide evidence of this perspective.

## Responding to Para Culture

Angelica produced only two full-length narratives on work. In the first, she examined the connection between her bi-lingual status in the school system and her "independence" from authority figures at her job site. Although she introduced the text as a response to Stephanie's narrative on the "conduct codes" embedded in para culture, this journal entitled "Crossing the Border" represented a departure from her narrative style (re-iteration and paraphrase, followed by comment) because she immediately introduced her own perspective on the topic. Of particular interest [to me] was the irony Angelica highlighted vis-a-vis her bi-lingualism:

Being a Spanish speaking student is a serious disability in college, but on the job it's valued because many teachers do not speak Spanish well enough to communicate with parents when their children need help. Being a bi-lingual in Spanish and English gives me independence to interpret what parents want to ask and what the teacher wants the parents to know. I can understand both sides of the question and have confidence in my knowledge of the school system, so I

am aware of what is required of the child and how to explain it to the parents. Since I work mostly with Spanish speaking parents and their English speaking children (knowing both languages), I am not kept out of important meetings and decisions by my lower status as a para -- they need me.

My written response to this narrative stressed the juxtaposition of her bi-lingual status at college and at her school job site. I found it interesting that she saw her bi-lingualism as a "serious disability" in her student life, while at the same time, she stressed her knowledge of both languages in her discussion of work. I also posed a question about her involvement in the decision-making processes at her job site as her narrative implied that bi-lingual paras were more valued on the job. Her written response surprised me because it focused on the unfair treatment of bi-lingual paras who act as parent/teacher liaisons for students:

Paras who act as parent/teacher liaisons for bi-lingual students should be compensated for the "special knowledge" they bring to their jobs. On one hand, I get into more meetings and play an active part in the

educational process, but on the other hand, I get more work than other paras for the same pay.

This brief response highlighted another dimension of the paras' work that I wanted to explore further, so, I asked Angelica to read this set of narratives aloud in class. The women pointed out that although bi-lingual liaisons, like Angelica, are the only paras who use their language skills (officially), many regular paras speak more than one language and are used as interpreters (unofficially). I asked the women, "How many of you have been asked to speak a language other than English at your job site?" Two thirds of the class said they were occasionally called upon to translate written documents or speak to non-English speaking parents of school children. The language groups represented by the thirty women in the room included French (Creole), Spanish, Italian, German, Polish, Russian, Yiddish, Chinese, Hindi, and Vietnamese. Although I was initially surprised by this revelation, the women were quick to point out that many paras are first or second generation immigrants, whereas most school teachers are native speakers of English who have, at best, only a few years of foreign language from high school or college -- mostly Spanish. As Stephanie informed me, "Although English

is my primary language, both my parents and grandparents always spoke Italian at home, so I learned Italian along with English." Angelica added a final thought to this dialogue, drawing attention to the fact that "paras also speak more of the dialects (the language of ordinary people), whereas teachers learn only the standard forms of a foreign language which can vary a lot from the dialects." Thus, for me the teacher, Angelica's brief narrative on the benefits of bi-lingualism illuminated another dimension of para culture (and para knowledge). For the women, it sparked a dialogue on "knowledge" they already possess (which is de-valued in their present circumstances), but at the same time, has the potential to enhance their credentials in the future.

In her second narrative on work (written during our class discussion of "The Triangle Fire"), Angelica focused on her prior employment at a children's clothing factory. She opened a new perspective on the tedium and boredom of the needle trades in a narrative entitled "Working at the Factory":

...The women worked together laughing and joking about our lives with "macho-men" and our children growing up to be Americans. I spoke only English there and

learned to become more fluent...I remember working on little garments for infant girls and wondering who would buy them, what baby's back would wear them and how the lace would feel on their little arms and legs. When I packed boxes, I would think about the destination of the warm terry clothe pajamas and the pants and tops. Mostly, I remember sewing little seams together and putting the finishing touches on dresses - - picking just the right bow to match the outfit, doing just the right stitch to finish. I dreamed how it would be to stand in front of a fancy shop window and pick out one of the communion dresses...Joe, my boss, would always make a present of the most beautiful outfits in the factory for women when they gave birth to a baby -- that is the kind of person he was ...The factory was good place to be until I could move up to working in a school.

I found Angelica's capacity to enhance even mundane factory work (that is, to use her mind to make it interesting) quite striking. I was also impressed by the length of this narrative<sup>19</sup> (written on December 2nd) which indicated how writing literacy narratives significantly

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<sup>19</sup>See Appendix A for the complete narrative.

increased both the quantity and the quality of the paras' writing. Angelica's narratives exemplified this pedagogical result as she moved from a single sentence description of her current job on the first day of class to a well-developed, detailed account of a prior work experience by the end of the semester.

From the Sixth Grade to the Community College:  
Angelica's Campus Experience

One of Angelica's most successful narratives on campus life was a series of journal entries entitled "From the Sixth Grade to the Community College." A richly detailed response to Stephanie's series of narratives on "Coming to College at Thirty Something," this narrative account, written from the perspective of a mother with adult children, offered a different approach to conflicts between domestic life and higher education. Angelica wrote about her husband:

Lacking misbehaving dogs and kids to absorb negative (male) attention and complaints, there was nothing but school work to take my attention from him or his attention from my schoolwork. Once the pay raises ended, there was no incentive for him to leave me

alone.

Angelica went on to explain that her refusal to relinquish her long-term educational goals destroyed her marriage:

He's a man who refused to live with a woman more educated than himself. Like Stephanie, I kept silent until my silence no longer kept him silent.

However, the most striking image which emerged in this narrative series was what Angelica called "The Transformation":

I was transformed in college from an elementary school dropout to a person with "potential" to be educated. I say "potential" because it's a long road from sixth grade to higher education, but it is a road that was offered to me once I became a para. Passing my GED after only a few months of preparation at KCC, I was able to go straight to college classes -- truly a transformation for me.

One of the most motivated students in the class, Angelica viewed access to higher education as a powerful

resource for upward-mobility and she associated this opportunity with coming to the mainland U.S. from Puerto Rico. "I can't understand," she would often say, "why so few people take advantage of all the opportunities in this country." For Angelica, the community college represented a tangible gateway to a better life. Although she occasionally expressed fear of the "gatekeepers" who might obstruct her path in her narratives on campus life, she always concluded these journals with a positive image of herself as she transcended yet another boundary.

Angelica's end of semester assessment of her narratives emphasized the gradual expansion of her written texts (from a sentence on the first day of class, to a full-length series of journals at the end). She charted the progress of her writing through a discussion of those journals which "relied mostly on notes from other para's narratives" as opposed to those that contained "more original thoughts and opinions" and reported that the latter were drawn from topics she felt strongly about. Although Angelica continued to struggle with what she called "writing enough at one time," she did produce "enough" (written text) at one time to pass both the final exam and the writing assessment test which she called "A Glorious Transformation." Unlike Stephanie (who simply devised a few time-saving study

strategies that helped her do well in college, so far), Angelica entered a world of academic textbooks and unfamiliar discourse that made enormous demands on her time and energy. Her semester-long narrative strategies revealed the "stop" and "start" pattern she employed to cope with the challenges of higher education. They also illuminated her capacity to observe a variety of speaking and writing patterns that other paras employed in class, and to successfully incorporate them into her own narratives.

"Welcome to Cassandra's World":  
The Narrative Strategies of a Thematic Writer

Cassandra, a thirty-one-year-old African-American single mother of six composed autobiographical narratives that distinguished her among the paras as a "story-teller." Her early journals, replete with stark visual images and graphic dialogue evoked a clear and vivid portrait of her everyday life in one of New York City's housing projects. Cassandra's domestic journals were drawn from a "thematic center" (fear of violence) which she connected with her life experience as an African-American woman. Throughout the semester, she developed a narrative style through which she constructed "actual scenes" and "potential scenarios" -- mingling real-life events with hypothetical outcomes. Like

most "thematic writers," Cassandra composed her journals from the perspective of a single identity (an African-American female) playing out her multiple roles within a specific cultural context. I noted with interest that her "self-portrait" entitled "Welcome to my World" introduced her race, gender, and physical surroundings before revealing her name:

Welcome to my world, the fifth floor of Building "B" where I, a Black woman, share a little cubicle of space with six children, an old woman, and crawling creatures big and small. Peeling paint, clanking pipes, cracked windows, and creaking floor boards greet me each morning in a world where everything is green (the color of money). Green halls, green walls, green floors, green doors, and black people (well, almost everything is green). There are no "names" in my world, just letters of the alphabet. Can you guess where I'm at? That's right, it's "alphabet city," a little city, (a ghetto really) where the letters A, B, C, and D mark the fences of life -- things that confine black women, like Cassandra, inside.

This "self-portrait" continued to juxtapose the use of

letters in place of names, reporting that "most people in alphabet city keep in step with the street signs and the building codes by referring to themselves as D.J., P.J., M.B., and such...because to be anonymous in this world is to be 'safe'."

Other paras, briefly silenced by this gloomy vision of everyday life, offered questions in place of comments. They wanted to know about Cassandra's children and the "old woman" she lived with. "You guys know all about my kids," I talk about them all the time,<sup>20</sup> and the old woman, that's my mama." I wanted to know more about her history with writing, and in my written response to this "self-portrait, I asked Cassandra, "Do you keep a diary or a journal?" "Yes," she wrote, "I write in a diary occasionally, mostly when I'm depressed."

Because the other women did not anticipate the tone and language style of this "self-portrait," many questioned its "correctness" despite the fact that they all admired its "originality." When I asked the class for some specific commentary on "correctness," some pointed out that Cassandra described her environment instead of herself (which they believed was the primary purpose of this introductory

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<sup>20</sup>This comment highlighted the fact that most of the womens' "self-portraits" were written to inform me (the teacher). Assuming that the paras thought they already knew everything about her, Cassandra used her "self-portrait" to shed light on an "invisible" aspect of her identity.

journal). Others questioned the association between "alphabetical street names" and "using initials in place of names" in Cassandra's neighborhood saying, "Using initials is such a common thing to do, why do you connect it to living in alphabet city?" I asked the women (who seemed to be grilling Cassandra on irrelevant details) to explain their main criticism of this narrative. In their view, Cassandra did not stick to the topic.

Apparently, Cassandra's use of a narrative strategy that Sarah Michaels (1986) calls "topic associating style,"<sup>21</sup> raised concerns about the "main focus" of the text and sparked questions about the relevance of the material which the women described as "inappropriate," even though most agreed that, "it's interesting and well-written." By contrast, Cassandra considered her "story" to be what she called "an accurate, but creative representation of my world -- a portrait of my everyday life."<sup>22</sup> Of particular interest [to me] was Cassandra's independent line of thinking about narrative writing. Unlike Angelica, who

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<sup>21</sup>In a chapter in *The Social Construction of Literacy* (ed. Jenny Cook-Gumperz) Michaels (1986) examines the response of a teacher to an African-American student's narrative. Michaels identifies a "clash of cultural styles" in which the black student narrates what Michaels calls a "topic associating" style which "consists of a series of segments or episodes which are implicitly linked in highlighting some person or theme...This style clashes with a "topic centered" style, preferred by the teacher and white students" (103).

<sup>22</sup> Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) *Ways With Words* shows how African-American students view language as "performance": playful, inventive, designed to entertain.

viewed "difference" as "error," Cassandra did not feel the need to conform to other people's definitions of narrative writing (or free-writing as she called it). She told the women that she felt entitled to exercise "freedom" to design the "background" of her own "self-portrait."

"Life in The Projects":  
The Domestic Experience of a Thematic Writer

Born and raised in the same building she now calls "home," Cassandra was a seasoned observer of life in the projects. In her first narrative on family life entitled "Keeping Time," she illustrated how she could tell the time of day by the view from her fifth floor kitchen window:

There's a time for everything here and everything happens right on time. I don't need a clock, just an open kitchen window marks the hours and the days... Routine can be boring, but it fills up the time and its predictability is a comfort to me... Lets me know that everything is okay..."

In the body of this narrative, Cassandra created a cast of well-defined characters and tracked their comings and goings by what she called "the project clock." Through bits

of conversation she overheard from the courtyard and detailed descriptions of "outfits," Cassandra predicted the "destinations" of these neighborhood travellers. The dialogue and body language she described in this piece vividly portrayed the gossip, the petty jealousies, the alliances and inter-dependencies of the building's tenants suggesting an extension of "family life" beyond blood ties. Particularly noteworthy was Cassandra's conclusion in which she drew some striking parallels between the residents of "Building B" and the characters in Thornton Wilder's (1938) *Our Town* (a play she recently read with the sixth graders she tutors at her job site). This final passage highlighted similarities between a large urban dwelling and small towns like Grover's Corners. Her detailed descriptions of what she called "ghetto types in Building B" provided a stark contrast to the what she dubbed "neighborly types in *Our Town*." At the same time, the passage also suggested that people in these two very different settings often transcend the limits of the nuclear family by what she called "their common confinement to small spaces and familiar faces."

In subsequent narratives, Cassandra developed an ongoing dialogue with some of the characters she mentioned in this first journal which juxtaposed actual conversations with some hypothetical outcomes for the speakers and the

listeners. For example, she recounted the "dollar and a dream scenarios" D.M. spun every Saturday morning on his way to the lotto agent..."what he'd buy, who he'd get revenge on, how he'd fly away from these projects". And then there was Mrs. Jackson stopping neighbors in the courtyard looking for a "second opinion" on her "ailment of the week". The possible outcomes on these and other dialogues with neighborhood characters illuminated Cassandra's close connections to them and to their lives and also illustrated her capacity to imagine some thought-provoking consequences if the narrators in her journals actually got what their conversations claimed they wanted out of life.

Other women responded to what Cassandra called her "extended family" with some interesting commentary on the borders between "blood relations" and "outsiders," "ethnic or racial identity" and "extended family," etc. But Cassandra said she felt more comfortable using close proximity and living conditions to define a type of "extended family."

My written comments on these narratives on family life focused on the blend of fact and fiction -- the fact that Cassandra so effectively immersed the reader in her world. But I wanted to know more about the actual living conditions

and her relationships with the people closest to her. She wrote briefly about her complex and agonizing conflicts with her three sons (all of whom had been in and out of jail for petty crimes). But her narratives always returned to the larger "family" she created for herself in the housing project. Cassandra's response to my inquiries -- that is, brief, informational texts -- brought to light some of the difficulties students encounter with literacy narratives and other forms of autobiographical writing in the composition class. She did not want to reveal painful, personal episodes. Fortunately, Cassandra was a creative and capable writer who found ways to improvise, but her case brought to mind a number of conflicts that emerge with this type of pedagogy, most significant among them, the student's right to privacy. Thus, my decision to encourage the women to develop their narratives according to their own definitions of the themes was a good pedagogical choice. In general, everyone found ways to work with their own thematic material without much discomfort -- and writers like Cassandra led the way for those who felt less secure in their right to establish thematic boundaries.

Reading in Sixth Grade:  
Cassandra's Role in the School Library

Cassandra's narratives on para life centered on issues of literacy in the African-American community and emphasized her fear that the Black school children of today will create tomorrow's "under-class." She explained her use of the term "under-class" as a "label" she heard used by news commentators on public television to "stick on black people in their discussion of a 'bombed-out' housing project in Chicago." She concluded that these journalists associated this term not only with poverty and urban blight in Black neighborhoods, but with two particular segments of the U.S. population; first, those most likely to be in jail, mental institutions, homeless shelters, or crack houses, and second, those most likely to be victims of violent crimes committed by the first group. "As an African-American woman working in the school system," she wrote, "my most important mission is to contradict this stereotype -- one child at a time."

One narrative, in particular, which she called "Choosing Books for Non-Readers", depicted her daily struggle to hold the attention of the bored, frustrated, and resistant African-American students labeled "slow learners with attention span deficit" by professional white

educators:

Even with only six or seven of them at each session, I feel as if I need a pair of handcuffs in one hand and a baseball bat in the other. At the same time, the marginal status of the students I tutor creates a very wide berth for me to work with them. Because no one cares about them, their (extra) reading curriculum is not developed by professional teachers, but placed on the shoulders of paras like me. And I go absolutely wild. I love it."

Enjoying the ironic freedom of her unusual circumstance, Cassandra went on to discuss her searches through the shelves of the public library, her "literary discoveries" there, and her "obsession" with reviewing six or seven books for each one she deemed "worthy" of the children:

For six years I've been working my way through the public library and submitting book orders to the Board of Ed. without much response. But, in the meantime, I choose lots of drama for them to read because they really like the idea of each student 'playing a character' in our reading sessions. I imagine scenarios

with them that I call 'alternative endings' which I think helps them to imagine possibilities instead of just accepting a sad ending to a story. They soon learn that to imagine an alternative ending, you have to pay attention to all the different aspects of the real story and figure out what the character might have done differently.

The women wanted to know how Cassandra circumvented the rules for library tutors. "Aren't they supposed to read from the assigned textbook?," they asked. "Technically, yes," she said. "But everyone of these kids is on medication for hyper-activity, no one expects them to sit long enough to read a paragraph. If I can get them to sit in one place for an hour, the teachers don't care what book I'm reading with them." Here, Cassandra offered the class a way of re-thinking their actions, positions, and behaviors through diverse reflection on their work and opened up possibilities against the subordinating status quo.

In my written response to this narrative, I asked Cassandra about the connections she made between African-American students and attention-span deficit and other learning problems. Obviously she had taken the time to study this problem on her own because she supplied a great

deal of statistical data on the frequency of such "labels" in the African-American community and also the tendency for these children to be placed on medication to control their behavior. For example, she had obtained some documents from a guidance counselor at her school site which showed that sixteen-percent of the African-American children were on medication for hyper-activity (as opposed to five-percent for whites and nine-percent for Hispanic students). She told me she did not dispute the diagnosis of individual children because, she said, "they are wild and uncontrollable, I can see that." However, she did wonder about the environmental causes (lead, air pollution, unsanitary living conditions, rodents, etc.) that might play a role in these problems among poor urban African-American children. I was impressed by her knowledge and by her commitment to the health and education of children in her community.

"On the Way Up":  
Cassandra's Campus Experience

Overall, Cassandra's narratives on campus life offered an optimistic and positive assessment of higher education. Although she wrote a few journals which expressed her "fear of not finishing," and depicted some "possible scenarios" for failure (twenty years of re-taking the math assessment

test, in particular), her most successful journals focused on her sense that college offered a "wider world, where negative stereotypes are less often believed, and teachers are usually helpful, even grateful, when students show an interest in their class." One narrative in particular, entitled "Putting the Cart Before the Horse," offered a critical assessment of vocational education:

As I see it, it's not that vocational classes are boring, but that students are not ready to deal with them because you can't appreciate long lists of information if you don't have any context. Personally, I would like college to tell me how these methods got started (something about the history of education in this country, for example). I want to know where these theories come from and why one way is better than another. They don't tell you that, so school is a process of boring, tedious memorization. Just think of the multiplication tables. I was in junior high before I figured out "why" two times two is four, even though I knew it was long before that.

This was one of the most conflicted narratives Cassandra composed during the semester. However, this

indictment of the "banking method" of education (which could be read as a "laundry list" of complaints), was balanced by her endorsement of some type of "context" in education. Thus, I focused my written response on Cassandra's use of the term "context." I asked her to explain the relationship she sought between factual information and contextual background in education. To my surprise, her response implied the absence of connection between the two ideas in institutions of higher learning. She simply wrote: "The job site provides a necessary contradiction to everything I hear in my education classes. In that way, the information is useful."

In general, Cassandra's accounts of campus life suggested that she saw no connection between higher education and professional preparation. For example, in a narrative entitled "Becoming a Teacher," Cassandra portrayed the process of "training" as "spitting the crap out on the paper and hoping none of it sticks." Later in the semester, Cassandra designed her own curriculum plan for her students which presented alternative views on how teachers might be educated and students might be taught more effectively. In short, this narrative suggested instruction based on child development and social issues. "You can only learn to teach them," she wrote, "if you learn who they are and how they

became who they are." Although many of the ideas she suggested had a ring of "common sense" to them, her accounts of conflict between "work in the real world" as she called it, and the "fantasy land of college" caused me concern about her capacity to survive in the college system long enough to become credentialed.

Cassandra's written assessment of her semester-long narratives described the process of composing as "a learning experience in communication." Overall, she said that she thought her narrative style frequently ignored her audience. Unlike Stephanie, who said she found it difficult to write "spontaneously" in class, Cassandra noticed that she enjoyed "spontaneity" so much that she often wrote "impulsively, by jotting down the first thing that came to my mind."

Although she reported being most comfortable reading the narratives that addressed issues, what she enjoyed most was writing the episodic scenarios and recollections of life in the projects. Overall, Cassandra felt satisfied with the progress of her journals and reported that this collection represented the longest text she had ever composed. "Re-reading it," she wrote, "I wondered how the whole book would read if I revised, re-organized, and developed the pieces into one long text? But, then it wouldn't be a narrative, it would just be a college essay."

Overall, the diversity of process and content in the journals of these three paras illustrate the most common approaches to literacy narratives I observed among the group. The distinctions among "initiators," "respondents," and "thematic writers" fostered a participatory and democratic process from which everyone benefitted. My teaching journal illuminates my own evolution in response to the womens' development as speakers and writers. Early on, I relied upon "initiators," like Stephanie (who wrote the longest journals and who were the most willing narrators), to offer new and interesting material for journal reflection. Most of my early journal entries refer to their texts, their perspectives, and their power to influence their peers. By mid-term, I was most taken with "respondents," like Angelica, who developed into active listeners and very subtle critics of para texts. Although their voices were soft and their narratives brief, they questioned assumptions and illuminated alternative perspectives that encouraged deeper inquiry into the issues under discussion. Only towards the end of the semester did I grapple with the texts of "thematic writers," like Cassandra, who often seemed cut-off from the mainstream of para culture. Because of their tendency to produce journals dominated by a single and conflicted identity and their

insistence on a broader interpretation of "free-writing" (which offered multiple interpretations of a single theme), their texts often disrupted an ongoing discussion. However, by the end of the semester, my journals increasingly referred to their narrative *presence* (which so often challenged their listeners' attention spans and interpretive powers) that I could no longer dismiss them as merely "disruptive" or "self-involved." In fact, as Cassandra aptly noticed at our last student-teacher conference, the texts of "thematic writers" resembled full-length literary works -- something she called her "Book of Life." Thus, as the paras developed into more confident and individuated speakers and writers through our mutual process of narrative production, I developed into a teacher with more awareness of the complex process of student development and became more appreciative of the individual ways of being and knowing that my students bring to class.

## Conclusion

### A Critical View of the Pedagogy

The women's encounter with critical pedagogy was successful, largely because a core of ten students (a third of the class) initially moved the negotiations forward and became active, critical participants in the process -- from day one. Not wanting to share authority, the other two-thirds of the class initially entrusted the design of the syllabus to members of their peer groups who were more willing to take risks by speaking up in a public setting. Because their prior school experiences had developed the paras into passive receivers of "knowledge," it was easier for most to defer authority, if not to the teacher, then at least to other students. I would later learn that it was particularly difficult for many of the women to speak freely -- that is, to reposition themselves rhetorically in relation to the group.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the typical freshman writing class where students are assigned to sections at random and meet their classmates and teacher for the first time on the first day of class, the members of this special para section had already developed a social and educational history together, in essence, a "pecking order" that had been firmly

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<sup>1</sup>The appearance of their written texts (see Appendix) also illuminates the difference between the self-confident writers like Stephanie whose pen flowed smoothly across the page and students like Angelica (whose hand shook as she wrote spontaneously in class).

established during their long-term odyssey in vocational classes. Thus, the vocal few who greeted me with such self-assurance on the first day of class were accustomed to representing the interests of entire group and adept at "talking-back" to the teacher's authoritative voice.

On the one hand, critical pedagogy, which placed the paras face to face in peer groups, allowed the "status quo" to temporarily persist through the negotiation of the syllabus -- the dominant few selecting the themes for the autobiographical accounts and most of the outside source material for the reflective narratives on readings. On the other hand, without assignment sheets and detailed instructions from the teacher, the "status quo" was short-lived. Specifically, the "silent majority" found themselves defining the thematic boundaries of their material (individually) and defending their right to do so.

Pedagogically, then, it became crucial to ensure that every para in the room read an excerpt from her narrative during the first few class sessions. In this way, the "silent majority" gradually gained confidence in their rhetorical authority -- and the power relations among the students themselves reconstituted itself. In addition, the multiple perspectives on their themes also paved the way for supplemental material (like the Board of Ed. pamphlet and

Rebecca's scrapbook) to make its way into the classroom. The spontaneous appearance of these materials allowed the official syllabus to be re-negotiated (informally) throughout the semester without serious consequences to continuity of our subject matter. Thus, the women began to see the benefits of a flexible curriculum design which encouraged the inclusion of new source material.

No longer under pressure to memorize pre-packaged "right" answers or to compete with each other for a brief time to speak in class, the paras also discovered the benefits of active listening and democratic dialogue. In other words, they could not come to class with prepared answers (or even questions about the readings) because their literacy narratives were composed and read in class. To participate fully in the follow-up discussions, the women had to listen carefully to their peers in a structured way, while at the same time, learning to take the risk of thinking aloud about the narratives before they had the material fully grasped.

Throughout the semester, their narratives moved from description to interrogation and finally to re-conceptualization of their multiple roles. One striking example of this pattern emerged in Stephanie's series of

narratives entitled "Facilitating Emily."<sup>2</sup> Beginning with a description of her role as a keyboard facilitator, Stephanie developed this theme into an interrogation of the usefulness of keyboard facilitation as a technique in the education of autistic children. Finally, she confronted the issue of "purpose" in relation to her para role. No longer satisfied to identify the role of paraprofessional as a facilitator of the teacher, she claimed her unique educational function as "separate," "distinct," and "necessary...providing a service no teacher can give to a handicapped child." Thus, this series of narratives brought Stephanie to a re-interpretation of her role the school system.

Herein lies one of the most significant benefits the paras derived from their semester-long literacy narratives. The act of writing about their multiple roles over many weeks raised questions about the lists of duties and descriptions of everyday life they had recorded so quickly on the first day of class. For one thing, everyone's lists and definitions were different, bringing to light the questions, "Who determines what a family is? How does a para function in the school system? How do adult women with full-time jobs and family responsibilities get through college"? Although a few paras expressed doubts about these

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<sup>2</sup>See Chapter Four (p.224).

questions, most had strong personal opinions and attitudes about them which was a clear indication that they were engaging the material, not merely memorizing or mimicking a collective understanding of their roles (based on the ideas of the majority or the attitudes of the teacher). Specifically, they were not taking the material for granted, easing back into their positions as "receivers of knowledge."

From another perspective, through critical inquiry into the nature of their roles in working-class culture, the women re-defined their positions as *silent facilitators of other people's lives* without abandoning their identities as wives, mothers, and paraprofessionals. Their narratives articulated a sense of the intrinsic value they placed on their roles in the home and the school system -- something that was missing from the "self-portraits" composed on the first day of class. For example, Gloria's narrative on the "symbolic meaning of household objects"<sup>3</sup> conflicted with the information she had compiled in her "self-portrait" -- where she had endorsed the value system of the dominant culture, saying "because housework is unpaid labor, it has little worth." Through her more thoughtful and focused discussion of the "symbolic meaning" attached to household objects,

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<sup>3</sup>See Chapter Two (p. 94).

Gloria raised the profile of domestic life as facilitating more than other people's needs. That is, she acknowledged the value she places on this role and highlighted the satisfaction she derives from doing it -- something she admitted she never thought about until our class discussion of the Board of Ed pamphlet. In a similar approach to student life, Angelica's vision of her "Glorious Transformation" from "an elementary school drop-out to a person with potential to be educated"<sup>4</sup> placed a definite value on the community college setting -- a place often denigrated in higher education, but one that offered her access to higher education.

Thus, through the act of writing narratives about their everyday lives and entering into critical dialogue about them, the paras uncovered some of the complex intersections of their multiple roles, not just in relation to conflict or in connection to their potential future selves, but also in light of how they define their current roles and how they choose to enact them, today.

#### The Image of the Silent Facilitator

The women's narratives not only illuminated how class,

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<sup>4</sup>See Chapter Four (p.252).

age, occupation, and gender combine to construct them as *silent facilitators of other people's lives*, but also showed how the use of "strategic silence" facilitates them in their working and student lives. Their concept of silence was one significant way the paras distinguished themselves from professional women. On one hand, the theme of the *silent facilitator* emerged on the first day of class (with Stephanie's metaphor "Multi-Functional Mom") and continued to develop through the women's narratives on housework, para culture, and campus life. On the other hand, their silence, particularly on the domestic front revealed that despite the fact that they are not at home full-time with children, the paras still endorse the attitudes of working-class culture in relation to the roles of wife and mother (where work and other activities outside the home are given low priority).

Because the paras are women whose folkways teach them that college is unnecessary (or even an impossible luxury) for working-class mothers, they typically harbor some resentment towards highly-educated professional women who seem to have it all (career, family, well-governed children, etc.). They cringe at the word feminism, which they associate with affluent women. Although most came of age during the recent women's movement, they have not had access to consciousness raising groups, organized actions, feminist

literature, and the wider educational/professional options of their upper-class counterparts. In fact, as middle-class baby boomers were marching on the college campuses in the 1960's and 70's, the working-class paras were pushing baby carriages, just as their mothers had done a generation before them. But, unlike their non-wage earning mothers, many more of them have been compelled by declining family incomes to take jobs outside the home. Because they live in communities still dominated by low wages and by patriarchy, their visions of womens' potential in society conflict with those shared by most feminist academic women. They see class first and gender second, which is why feminism has low appeal to them. From this perspective, their positions in low-paying, low-status jobs is not primarily about gender oppression, but rather about economic conditions of being working-class. On the one hand, their worker husbands, no longer earning enough to support the family, expect them to earn wages in the job market; on the other hand, as divorce and abandonment skyrocket, these working-class males have turned many of the paras into single mothers. As bell hooks explains,

Women in lower class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white, would not have defined women's

liberation as women gaining social equality with men since they are continually reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share a common social status...and that many men in their social groups are exploited and oppressed (*From Margin to Center*, 18).

Although the paras' everyday lives reflect the circumstances hooks points out, most of them are unfamiliar with writers (like hooks) who address issues of race, class, and ethnicity. Thus, their narratives stress their difference from professional middle-class women, not common conditions.

There narratives also show that unlike the "Scholarship Boys and Girls" who experienced a painful separation from their working-class roots as a consequence of higher education (but moved on to assimilation into the values and the world view of the academy), these adult working women undergo a process of partial assimilation, but not one of painful separation as they move toward professional life. In other words, unlike the young, unmarried, and childless "Scholarship Boys and Girls" who entered adulthood as middle-class professionals with most of their life choices still ahead of them, adult working-class women who return to school in mid-life must re-negotiate their adult identities within families and communities heavily invested in the

"status quo." The conflict between the child-rearing patterns the paras encounter in their college textbooks and those they actually believe in and practice at home is a case in point. As Valerie so aptly pointed out:

Reasoned verbal communication [as promoted by child psychologists] does work best in the long run if it has been an ongoing process in the child's life and everyone agrees that it's the right thing to do.<sup>5</sup>

But the paras' subordinate gendered positions in the working-class family cannot be over-turned by quoting from or experimenting with the new ways of thinking and acting they encounter on campus. The process of re-negotiating their adult identities (cultural separation) and assuming more expansive professional roles outside the home (assimilation) will likely emerge through a compromise similar to that which Carole described in her narrative on "Career Choices" in which she juxtaposed the "ideal" with the "possible"<sup>6</sup> in regard to "family values."

On the bright side, the women's narratives show that although their process of cultural separation and

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<sup>5</sup>See Chapter One (pp.67-68).

<sup>6</sup>See Chapter Three (p.161).

assimilation is more complex than that of working-class academics, it is not an impossible dream. Their narratives on study strategies and living in noisy, crowded working-class households clearly indicate that they have already developed many of the coping mechanisms they will need to survive and even thrive in higher education. For one thing, their use of "strategic silence" as a tool of female agency shows that they already know how to facilitate their own goals and agendas while serving the needs of their families. In addition, despite the noise and the lack of privacy at home, they consistently devise new techniques and strategies to facilitate their college studies.<sup>7</sup> They have also acquired a great deal of information from their vocational courses and developed an awareness of the sociological, psychological, and educational resources available to them on the college campus. In addition, through their encounter with critical pedagogy the women have gained access to dialogic methods of problem-solving and habits of critical inquiry.

Finally, the women's semester-long encounter with critical pedagogy and literacy narratives raised the profile of their experiences, their issues, their concerns, and offered them

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<sup>7</sup>Although nine out of ten women complained about the work load at various points in the semester, almost everyone managed to complete all of the assignments. In addition, each para wrote (on average) eighty-five pages of text in her semester-long journals.

a chance to inscribe their lives as wives, mothers, and workers. As a working-class wife, mother, student, teacher, and writer, I don't believe that the construction of a student identity necessitates the erasure of other identities. Because patriarchal family life and low-wages in the corporate economy restrict the paras' choices, the opportunity to write literacy narratives opened a forum for these adult working women to express their gendered conflicts with academic culture, to examine connections and conflicts among their multiple roles, and to analyze how their womens' experiences relate to formal knowledge, career goals, and larger issues in society. Although few in their lives honor them for raising families and working full-time while attending college, I do, and I also honor their struggle for "a voice of their own" in higher learning.

#### Afterward

Of the thirty women present on the first day of class, twenty-six completed the course. Of the twenty whose narratives are presented in this dissertation, eighteen went on to earn an associate degree at Kingsborough.<sup>8</sup> Seven of

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<sup>8</sup>Earning an associate degree was the primary goal of these women as stated by Cassandra on the first day of class. (see Chapter One, p.33).

the women (Stephanie, Janice, Karen, Gloria, Angelica, Cassandra, and Joan) continued their education at a senior college. Of those, four (Stephanie, Janice, Karen, and Gloria have thus far earned a B.A.). Stephanie is now enrolled in a special certificate program in school psychology; Janice teaches fifth grade in the New York City public schools, Karen is employed as a para-legal and enrolled in an M.B.A. program; and Gloria is teaching second-grade in the New York City public schools and working towards an M.A. in education. The remaining three (Angelica, Cassandra, and Joan) are all currently enrolled in senior colleges. Angelica is still working as a para while she attends a special evening program for returning adults at Brooklyn College -- she will receive a B.A. in sociology next year. Cassandra attends York College part-time and works for a public television station. Joan recently received a full-tuition scholarship at St. Joseph's College and attends full-time. She will receive her B.A. in English next year and plans to pursue an M.A. in English education at Brooklyn College.

## Appendix

A Self-Portrait by ~~Barbara Wright~~  
I'm a blissfully happy thirty-eight-year-old Italian-American wife and mother of FOUR. I love being a wife and mother, but as a "multi-functional mom," my days are busy they are divided into three separate lists of things that need to be done, one for home, one for work and one for school. At home, my day begins at 5:30 when I get up, take a shower, feed our dog [Max] and then wake up my husband (whose name is Gary). Then the kids start fighting over who can get into the bathroom first and who can get his or her choice for breakfast. After breakfast, I wash the dishes, pack the lunches and then I get dressed. By this time, I need to take another shower, but I don't have time. The second part of my day begins at school where I work as a communication facilitator for a little girl named Emily who is

autistic. I help her with colors, numbers, and read to her from story books. Sometimes she seems to be paying attention, but most of the time, it seems to me that she is in her own little world. Fortunately Emily does not become loud or physically violent as some autistic children do, so in that way, I have it easier than some other paras I know. I have lunch with Emily and then get a half-hour break that I usually use to go to the store, get something for dinner, bring it home, and check on my parents and Max. My mom is not too well and my dad is really no help when it comes to doing work around the house, he's a typical Italian man who thinks housework is woman's work. After I check up at ~~work~~<sup>home</sup>, I go back to school and do some keyboarding.

with Emily. This is a technique that is used to help autistic children communicate with the outside world. Emily seems to like this activity. At two o'clock on Monday and Wednesday I get release time to come to Kingsborough, but on the other days I stay until three. Mondays are easy because I cook a lot on Sunday, but Wednesdays are a problem. Gary works late, my daughter has basketball practice, and everyone is coming home at different times. Gary won't allow a microwave to pass through the main entrance of our house, so I'm cooking and warming up stuff until after nine. Of course, this does not count the time I spend at college. I'm tired by the time I get there and I'm exhausted by the time I leave. Although work and school

complicate my life, they also add a lot to the well-being of my family, like the second income I earn as a para and the new ideas I come across as a college student. I've learned so much that I feel as if I am a different person now, even though I'm also a tired one.

### The Mis-Adventures of Max [the dog]

When I look back on the changes in my family caused by my working and coming to college, my dog Max always comes up. Max, a seven-year-old collie/shepard mix, has been part of our family for about six years. Left to fend for himself by an owner who "took him for a ride" and abandoned him at a bus-stop near our shopping center, Max followed our kids home from the mall--and he stayed

on as the family pet. He had always been a very gentle and obedient dog until he noticed that he was the only one home all day. This happened gradually, as each child started school and came full-circle when I became a para. It was at this point that Max underwent a personality change.

He first began barking incessantly -- annoying my parents who live upstairs -- all day. He really became unbearable after 3 when he knew the kids were home, but not allowed to stay in our apartment while I'm not home.

He would hear them coming up the stairs to grandma's house and start pulling the bedspreads off their beds, knocking down lamps, and finally got into the disgusting habit of crapping all over the

house. Unfortunately, he was worst on the days I don't go home, but come straight to Kingsborough. That's when he did most of the crapping and ripping the furniture. At first, I suggested that we leave him outside in the yard when the weather was good, but he dug up my dad's tomato garden and disturbed the neighbors with his barking all day - especially after 3 when the kids came home.

I was at my wits end with Max (trying to solve the problem) when I started hearing a lot of grumbling about my working and going to school changing him from a loving pet into a nervous wreck. & The situation finally came to a head last Thanksgiving when he let me know that he was going to misbehave even when he wasn't left alone. The house was full of people,

the kids were playing ball with him in the backyard and let him inside when they came in to wash up for dinner. I was busy in the kitchen, and about to take my home-made chestnut dressing out of the turkey and make the gravy when I noticed that the bird was still too hot to handle comfortably. I placed it on the kitchen counter-sill and opened the sliding window so that it would cool slightly.

After setting the table, I went back to the kitchen and when I didn't see the bird on the counter, I thought I had put it back in the oven.

I do this a lot - take things in and out of the oven - since I have a warming section that keeps food hot without cooking it more. Anyway, I prepared all of the vegetables, got drinks for everyone, served the anti-paste,

and put on the coffee. When I put the pies in the oven, I opened the warmer to get the bird out and discovered it was empty. I started looking around the kitchen, looking around the dining room at the serving table, at the dining room table, but there was no turkey! Max had pushed the turkey off the counter and zipped out the side door. He ate the stuffing and ripped the bird apart leaving it in the driveway. By the time we found the mangled carcass in the driveway, it was too late to cook, so we ended up eating out.

Uncle Mike opened up the deli and we ate roasted turkey breasts (with my vegetables). I ran home, got the pies, and locked Max up next to the garage. When we got home, Gary (my husband) started

screaming at me for locking the dog up. He said I was punishing him for "acting out" because his whole life was turned upside down when I started working and going to school. My sons agreed with Gary saying it was ~~painful~~ pitiful hearing Max crying and whining and barking in our apartment when they came home from school. "He's doing that, mom, because he hears us and can't get to us." Then, my oldest son, said, "It's not fair and Max knows that. He's alone from eight a.m. to six p.m. on the days you go to college. He's lonely enough on other days when we all come home at three." So, it's not his fault because you changed his routine.

Max has had numerous other adventures since I returned to work. He ran away from home for a few days last spring, but

then returned with fleas and an ear infection.). He growls at strangers now and chases cars if we let him outside. Of all the complaints I expected ~~to hear~~ about my working and coming to college, this situation was not one of them. What makes this all the more frustrating for me is that you really can't communicate with a dog the way you can with children. Also, dogs don't "outgrow" things the way kids do - they are like children who never grow up. It's also hard to explain how the dog's problems have become the family's problems and finally been made my problems. Somehow all problems eventually come back to me. I've tried to give Max some extra attention now because his unhappiness is contagious -- people grumble and complain

more than usual. One of the most interesting things about coming to college (and dealing with Max at the same time) is some of the interesting theories I could apply to my situation from what I'm learning at school. For example, "is Max carrying a symptom of dysfunction for the whole family?" But, if I have to worry that my family is falling apart over this change, I'll go crazy. So, in some ways, it's nice to have Max and his Mis-Adventures around the house because I can ignore a lot of stuff that's just beneath the surface and blame it all on Max.

## Keeping House

It's not easy keeping house and keeping up with work and

school, but the choice (for me) is clear. Just keeping house is boring when you find yourself home alone all day. In the years since I became a para and started coming to Kingsborough, I started to develop a few useful strategies for getting everything done. Although during mid-terms and finally I'm usually overwhelmed, I think that I'm still happier being busier than I was when I had only one kind of life. One of the best ways I have found to survive as a student is to fit my studies into some regular household routines (so that I'm not off somewhere studying, but accomplishing my housework and doing schoolwork at the same time). Actually, with some practice, it becomes almost as easy as doing either one alone.

I tape index cards to the splash-board above the kitchen sink so that I can memorize facts and figures while I ~~do~~ wash the dishes. For example, last night I studied Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development while scrubbing the dirty pots and pans. On this particular night, I went on the clean pots and pans I keep under the sink because I wasn't quite finished memorizing (even though I had finished cleaning). The noise of the water running into the sink drowned out the sound of the portable television on the counter over the stove that my husband was watching and the noise of my kids fighting over the last piece of cake at the table. As you can tell, I always know what's going on in the family while I'm doing this, but I've

learned to screen out most of the unimportant stuff while I am still conscious of the big stuff and most importantly, I'm physically there with them so I don't hear Hey, Barbara, where are you? or Hey, mom, what are you doing? I find these questions more distracting than the regular noises which as I said before I can screen out. I also keep a list of chores that make a lot of noise like vacuuming and hosing down the screens in the backyard. I can just take my audio cassettes with me and get into my own little world of school while I look like I'm doing housework. This works for me (getting two things done at once while I appear to be doing only one thing).

Keeping Quiet

Keeping quiet is a strategy I've used when my family complains about Max because as long as they are busy worrying about the dog, they are not really focusing too much on me and my progress in school. Keeping up with Max and his behavior problems keeps them busy and keeps them out of my hair about work and school. It's not really a characteristic of Italian-American women to keep silent, but there are some ways that keeping silent is acceptable. For example, for an Italian-American woman, being silent in response to criticism is one thing, but asking for silence (dropping out of a conversation) is another. That is, "not talking back" is a good thing while "not talking" is a bad thing. You're

not supposed to argue with the man when he points out your faults, but becoming silent during this time is taken worse than answering back because you're showing him that you "silently disagree" with him and that you're punishing him for criticizing you by ignoring him. It's an Italian thing. Coming to college has made me long for silent time all to myself, time to study or read or write or even just to think. It's hard not to be able to hear yourself think because your house is so damn noisy all the time. Finding a quiet place to be alone in my house is one of my long-term educational and professional goals. Once I'm a teacher and earning more money, I'll be in a better

position to bargain for a room of my own because the money I'll be taking home then will make a difference in our standard of living and also the paperwork I'll have to do will make it seem more essential for me to have a room to myself. For now, I just try to keep a balance between not complaining (keeping silent about my needs) and not talking (which is really not allowed).

### Keeping Italian Traditions

Italian holiday traditions and Catholic rituals do not include any time for women to study for final exams in December (probably because women are supposed to be in the kitchen cooking the ravioli).

I shouldn't even say cooking the ravioli because at Christmas (and Easter) we make the ravioli from "scratch". This means getting a big pile of flour on a wooden board and breaking eggs into it, mixing it and rolling it out with a rolling pin to just the right thickness and consistency. Then you put a teaspoon of ricotta cheese every six inches until you cover the whole piece of dough, cover it with a second piece of dough and then cut it into squares or circles with a pastry cutter sealing the edges of each piece with a fork. It's time consuming and messy, but you can't get "store bought" for the holidays. This creates an unbearable conflict between home and school (especially in the fall semester) because things heat up at school

with exams, at work with excited and tired children, and at home with the holiday preparations. The worst part of this conflict between home and school at this time of year is watching my sisters (who also work for a living) doing everything so well at home, enjoying the extra cooking and baking, the last minute shopping, and the Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. For me, Christmas Eve is "recovery time" after a week of final exams. I'm falling off my feet and still have to cook Christmas dinner the next day. I want everyone to go home.

My name is [REDACTED]. I became a para to supplement my family's income and - came to Kingsborough to supplement my part. paycheck.

### Being a Strong Women

As [REDACTED] proved being a wife, mother, worker, and student involve a lot of daily tasks and a lot of hard work. You have to do so many things at home before you go to work. Day before and the night - at night when you are busy with cooking and with your children, but, women choose to do these things and it is really a better life than just doing housework because they are more interesting than being at home all day just waiting for your husband and children to come back. Even though I am more busy and a lot of times frustrated and tired from working all day, but I rather be an "extension cord" overloaded than a two socket wall plug that's stuck in the same place.

## Responding to the Family Estate

Because I spend the first five years of my married life in the same house with the older generation (my in-laws) I can relate to what ~~she~~ called her intergeneration conflicts because it's hard to live with so many people under one roof; there are always misunderstandings of one kind or another. I also felt like a BIG kid but also a BAD kid a STUPID kid. When you have a baby at 15 and move into your mother-in-law's apartment, what are you? You are not a grownup or a welcome person in the family because you are the problem that ruin her son's life, that's what you are. Also, ~~for~~ me, the older generation was still in their thirties still having babies of their own. So, my first born son ~~didn't~~ <sup>never</sup> have a high-chair or a carriage to call his own, he shared them with his uncle (my mother-in-law's new baby.)

## Family Ties

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Family ties are always seen differently from the outside especially when people on the outside do not know people on the inside very well and do not really understand their culture and traditions. For example, the ties among aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews who are the same age can be confusing to strangers, but not to my family because each person is special and knows the other family members not only by their titles (like aunt, cousin, brother, sister) but by their real being as a person and a member of our family. ~~She~~ wrote about her family (which seem around to her but it could be seen from outside is just as "unstable" because adult children are never allow to grow up and they live always with their parents and never become independent and self-sufficient.

## Being in Puerto Rico and living in the U.S.

Life in Puerto Rico is just being. You are the person you are and you do whatever you do to make your life. In the U.S. it is more like living, that is earning a living and you

have to do everything you can do to earn a living. There is no slow pace here as people are always running and pushing to get ahead. Puerto Rico is hot and sunny, no need to buy warm winter clothes, no need to freeze in cold apartment. Work is where you find it and it doesn't take much money to enjoy the good life.

People sit in the middle of the day and walk on the beach or they just sit around for a while and talk to other people and no one looks at you like what are you doing just sitting around in the middle of the day?

In the U.S. you work long days and need to buy a lot of goods and material things like washing machines and color T.V. or a stereo. But it is also true that just being in Puerto Rico makes a sameness of life that limits what you can become, you really live no future there because the future will just be the same as the present and the past. Nothing moves for you and you remain always in the same place. In the U.S. you have more opportunity to be different next year than you are now, I mean to advance yourself and your status in the world. You can grow through your work and also through education which is not really available in all places like Puerto Rico where university is not open to all citizens as in the U.S. So, it is a matter of choice, but if you choose to leave the island for the mainland, you must change your outlook on life ~~or~~ you will be left alone in a lonely ghetto.

### Crossing the Border

Being a Spanish speaking student is a serious disability in college, but on the job it is valued because many teachers do not speak Spanish well enough.

communicate with parents unless their children need help. This is most important when it comes to the child's schoolwork and the teacher cannot explain the kind of help the child needs, or that he or she is not doing assignments correctly or not completing homework. When these parents are called up they are often frustrated because they cannot ~~help~~ help their child if they do not understand the problem that child has and know how to help them.

But on the job is bilingual as valued, I mean being a Bilingual in Spanish and English because it gave me independent to interpret what parents want to ask and what the teacher wants the parents to know. I can understand both side of the question and have confidence in my knowledge of the parents' culture and also my knowledge of the school system so I am aware of what is required of the child and how to explain it to the parents. Since I work most with Spanish speaking parents and their English speaking children (knowing both languages) I am not kept out of important meetings and decisions by my lower status as a para - they need me.

### Working at the factory

~~My~~ narrative of factory life really touched my heart. I had much good fortune not to be in that same situation because I worked in a clean, safe place with a good hearted and considerate boss who treated the workers well. We did not have a union, but we earned good wages and worked overtime only when the seasons demanded more work. The women worked together laughing and joking a lot.

our lives with much more and our children growing up to  
 be Americans. I spoke only English there and learned to  
 become more fluent though many of the women were  
 Spanish and answered in their native language. I remember working  
 on little garments for infant girls and wondering what  
 would help them, what baby's back would wear them and  
 how the lace would feel on their little arms and legs.  
 When I picked pieces, I would think about the  
 destination: the woman in cloth pajamas and the ordinary practical  
 tops. Mostly I remember measuring the little ones to gather  
 and putting on the finishing touches on dresses - just the  
 right ~~to~~ to match the outfit, just the right  
 stitch to finish. The men. I never had a little girl and  
 I dreamed of how it would be to stand in front of a shop  
 in India and pick out one of the common dresses - I worked on.  
 My boys wore plain polo shirt and dungarees with four  
 pockets, nothing pretty or fancy. While we sewed, we  
 used to talk about how children's clothing made  
 them a part of the lives and the love notes. I sewed  
 clothes for the babies - this was obvious because  
 every detail was perfect and only the best fabric was  
 used. The buyers from Macy's and Bloomingdale's  
 were very particular and fussy when it came to  
 purchasing lots and they demanded the very best  
 workmanship for their customers. However, Joe  
 my boss would always make a present of the most  
 beautiful outfits in the factory for women when they gave  
 birth to a baby girl, that is the kind of person he was  
 and everyone loved him. So, ~~the~~ story, to me

a believable excuse I knew personally of situations like hers, but in my case, the factory was a good place to be until I could move up to working in a school.

From the Sixth Grade to the Community College

When I came to Kingborough to get my GED I was missing from school for more than 20 years. I never went to school in the U.S. even though I came here when I was still a girl I did not speak good English and I had also missed out on school days at home because I live too far away and I found more interesting things to do with friends like going to a beach or the park. No one checked up on us there and we didn't really need to know how to read or how to write and how to earn money from sewing or baby sitting. When I came to the U.S. I found out that a young Puerto Rican girl could earn good money from sewing and also meet a lot of people from the islands and have a good social life. This is where I met my future husband - in the factory I work at for my first job. As soon as I get pregnant we marry and right away we move into his mother's apartment. Later we manage to get a place of our own but by that time I had more kids. I didn't come to college until my teens, like 30 something and then it was hard for me to make up for all those years of going to the beach. But I did succeed in a big way through placing my mind on my school work. However, there became a serious problem with college, especially with my husband, because

Looking in behavior, days and nights to avoid negative (real) attention and complaint, there was nothing but actual work to take my attention from him or his attention from my actual work. Like ~~the~~, I kept silent, maintaining silence so he kept his silent. He would scream from the other room for me because he saw hot food, he would yell out the window when he saw me coming up the block, ~~telling~~ telling me a whole in Spanish, and telling the neighbors that I was sleeping with my professor at college. Once the pay raises ended, there was no incentive for him to leave me alone and things just went until I ran away and filed for divorce. Now I have an "Order of Protection" from the family court to keep him away from me. He's a man who refused to live with a woman more educated than himself and he thought that he could beat and humiliate me into obedience, but this is not Puerto Rico where there is no where for a woman to go without a man to take care of her.

### The Transformation

I was transformed in college from an elementary school dropout to a person with "potential" to be educated. This "potential" is accomplished by my transformation. I say "potential" because it is a long road from sixth grade to higher education, but it is a road that was offered to me once I became a para. Passing my GC Patten only a few months of preparation at KCI.

## "Welcome to my World"

Welcome to my world, the fifth floor of Building "B" where I, a Black woman, share a little cubical of space with six children, an old woman, and crawling creatures big and small. Peeling paint, clanking pipes, cracked windows, and creaking floor boards greet me each morning in a world where everything is green (the color of money). Green halls, green walls, green floors, green doors, and black people... (well, almost everything is green). There are no "names" in my world, just letters of the alphabet. Can you guess where I am at? That's right, it's "alphabet city," a little city, (a ghetto really) where the letters A, B, C, and D mark the fences of life. At least for now, there are fences, some of which are good -- protecting the "insiders" (tenants) from the "outsiders" (crack heads and dealers). But the fences are also things that confine Black women, like ~~gender~~, inside.

## Keeping Time

There's time for everything here and everything happens right on time. There's time for everything here because most people have nothing but time -- time on their hands to get into trouble, time on their hands to daydream, time on their hands to make too many babies, and time on their hands to remember (and try to forget) what they did with their time that brought them to this place where there is nothing but time.

I don't need a clock, just an open kitchen window marks the hours and the days. Everyone here has a routine - a daily routine, a weekly routine, a monthly routine and a yearly routine. By the days people plan the small adventures like buying the most food for the least amount of food stamps. Now this takes a lot of time (going from store to store for various sale items).

The days are also marked by the time people come home. D comes home for All My Children, One Life to Live, and General Hospital. The girl has not missed an episode in twenty years. She does all her business before noon, including working at the check-out counter off the books. Now MR "C" His daily plans begin ~~when~~ D come home - he sleeps all morning cause he been out all night riding the subway - Days he's an insomniac, but he sure can sleep during the daylight hours. Once there was a fire in the building and MR "C" slept on through the whole thing. He creeps out in his sneakers and his under-wear, down to the laundry to wash the only pair of jeans he ~~owns~~. Then he appears neat and clean as a whistle - go lay down in the subway all night, and come home filthy. The weekly clock is different for ~~the~~ folks than the daily one. Saturday's a big day for hanging around cause even people who works at home on the weekends. But the "project clock" ticks on from nine to five during the week when there's no one home who's worth

anything. We all out working, That's why I love my "sick days" — I see all the "Sickos" who don't work at legitimate professions and I know exactly where they headed, "CC" comes out after dark gets into ~~the~~ car, and comes back just before light. Her business is good business — keeps her in a hundred percent world in the winter, and boy, those designer blouses and linen skirts — she looks just like a business woman — she lie all the time, but the Project clock tells me where she at. The monthly clock strikes 12 on check day. Everyone outside early waiting for the mail man to come, I can't say I blame them, checks ~~get~~ be robbed all the time. But even those who don't get no checks come out early that day — just to look around and talk. So, the project clock, it marks routines. Routine can be wrong, but it helps up the time and its predictability counts too. Lets me know that everything is okay.

### Weekend Conversations

From my window I can hear the weekend conversations in the courtyard. Every Saturday morning D.M. has another dream. With his dollar in his pocket, he waits until 3 P.M. to buy his lotto ticket. I was born at 3, so that's got to be my lucky time, he says. I know I'll hit the big one someday, and when I do, I'll settle my affairs. I'll buy me a big car, black

with a sun roof and a C.D. Player. Best first thing is  
 to pay off all my ~~debt~~ debts cause I'm no dead-beat.  
 There are some guys who have some things coming to them  
 and with money I'll see that they pay for their silly  
 deeds. The I fly away from these projects cause its no  
 place for human beings to live. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I talk  
 to myself, Spend the dollar on groceries, or better put it  
 under the mattress -- with all the dollars you waste, you  
 could have that car by now. But D.M. gets some enjoyment  
 out of that dollar spending it on the lotto. He has Saturday  
 morning and his dreams of fortune, D.M. goes and looks  
 behind the bushes when he see Mrs Jackson. She's a real  
 downer with all her ills. The old woman will go on  
 forever over her latest sickness when there ain't  
 nothing wrong with her at all. People who got nothing  
 but time on their hands can't get no time her and  
 that's a shame. All she really needs is time, time  
 for someone to listen to her. Sometimes I listen from  
 my window while she talk ~~the same thing~~ even  
 when nobody's there. Then I call her up for some  
 tea and she tells me the same thing ~~every day~~  
~~that people have no money~~ I hear her say in  
 the court yard -- word for word. I wonder if she stays  
 up <sup>at</sup> night to memorize this thing. They say old people  
 have no memory, but this lady, if you can get her  
 off her present "condition" can remember a whole lot  
 more interesting things to talk about, like her former

life in Antigua. No that is interesting because she draws some strong pictures of the ~~city~~ Beauty and the peace on that island. But, after a few minutes she goes back to the "cold" in New York that makes her sick because the island was always warm and then before you know it she be back on her knees. I always think that if D.M. won the lotto or if Mrs Jackson got something real, D.M. would blow that money in twenty minutes cause he never had nothing and he don't know how to busy nothing. They'd find him shot dead in some alley by one of his enemies or he'd drink himself into oblivion. Old Mrs Jackson, I think she's wishing to get something so she can just rest. Whenever I hear these kind of conversation on Saturday morning, though, I think about the project family. They just people trying to get by in life, like me. But then I think, they're not really like me cause I do have something real to look forward to. I don't want to win the lotto or get attention cause I'm bored. Saturday, the project clock moves very slow - But on Monday morning, I have a place to go, to be with my kids in the reading circle, and that's more than they have.

### Choosing Books for Non-Readers

Can you imagine coming to work in a place where you are the only one who wants to be there? Sometimes I feel that way because the kids I work with

would rather be on the street -- all labelled "slow learners" by the system. Even with only six or seven of them each session, I feel as if I need a pair of knuckles in one hand and a baseball bat in the other. But then I remember what I'm going to do with them, and my frustration leaves me. I have to concentrate on what is possible in the short time I have them. Every Thursday, I go to the library and inspect the shelves that have books for young people, hoping to find something good to read with my kids. I usually end up back at the adult section because I'm very fussy about my material and I find that the regular collection offers more choices. Sometimes we don't read a whole book -- oh I see they are good, I stop. So, I have to have at least two or three things in mind for every session. Some groups love a particular book so much that we take up roles. They love playing a part in a play -- so I try to get ~~them~~ the books with a lot of dialogue and a lot of characters. Because no one cares about them, their (extra) reading curriculum is not developed by professional teachers, but placed on the shoulders of people like me (can you believe that?). And I go absolutely wild with the excitement and the freedom of choice that the library gives me. I love it.

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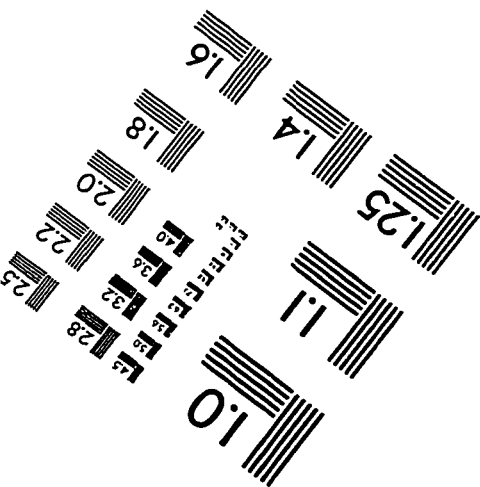
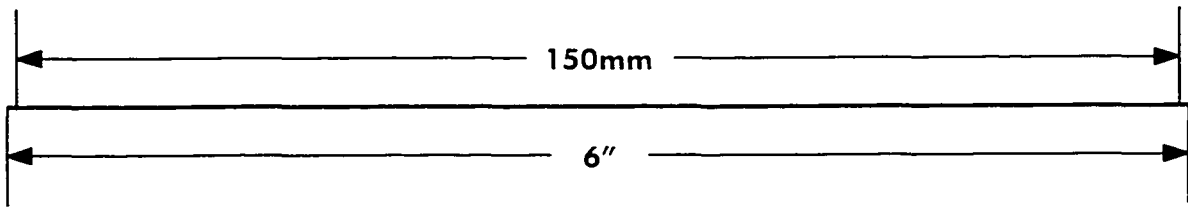
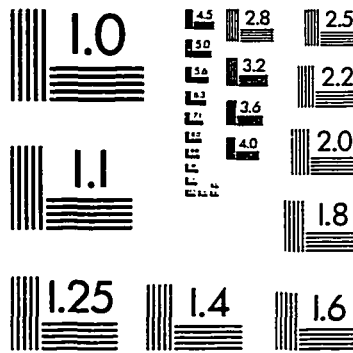
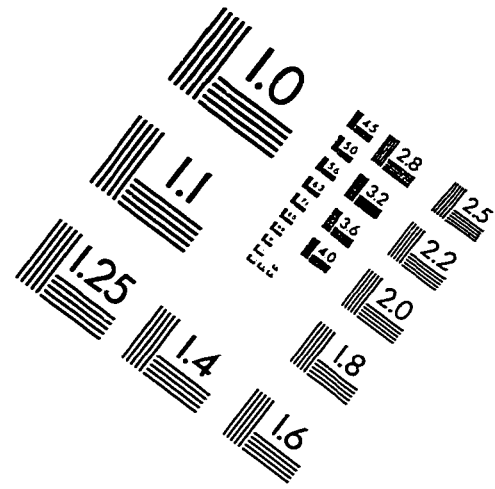
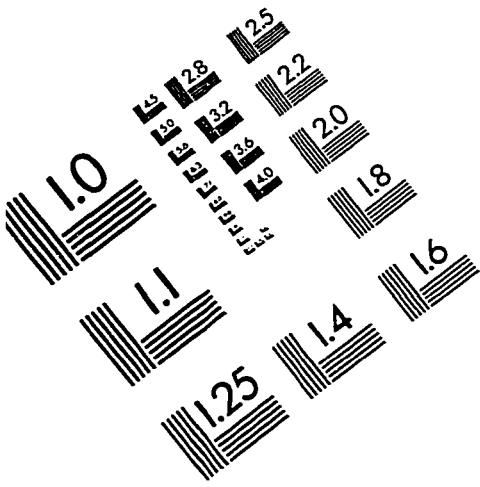
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