Beautiful Bootstraps: The Uneven Climb of Four Basic Writers In An Urban College

by

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Abstract

BEAUTIFUL BOOTSTRAPS: THE UNEVEN CLIMB OF FOUR BASIC WRITERS IN AN URBAN COLLEGE

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This dissertation presents a study of four first-generation, immigrant college students at a non-selective, urban college. These students' stories of academic success and failure intersect with and diverge from the dominant narrative of education as a pathway to middle-class professions. The students profiled in this dissertation, two men and two women, often struggle with economic and vocational anxiety as they seek college credentials. The impact of gender, race, class, and immigrant status crosses the borders of their separate experiences to help explain the material conditions in which they strive to improve their lives and the lives of their families. To examine the dynamics of their academic and vocational outcomes, this dissertation draws from critical social theory that embeds individual experiences in a broad context of race, gender, and class inequality in the US. To discuss these students' literate backgrounds and their college experiences as readers and writers, this dissertation is also informed by research in the field of Composition and Rhetoric, particularly the sub-field of basic writing, a contentious practice that goes back at least forty years. While closely following four basic writers, this dissertation also explores the methodological and theoretical questions raised by ethnography, case study method, and critical discourse analysis and proposes some orientations for future research into the relationship between non-selective higher education and upward mobility.

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Most of all, I would like to thank 'Carl,' 'Andy,' 'Michelle,' and 'Elizabeth' whose generosity made this work possible. This dissertation is dedicated to them.

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Introduction

The notion that education, particularly a college degree, is the key to career success is a particularly American idea. It is inscribed indelibly in what sociologists Grubb and Lazerson called 'the education gospel,' a national ethos of hard work in school paying off and of equal opportunity for all. Politicians typically tout higher education as one solution to the current economic recession which has left up to10% of Americans officially unemployed, many in the long-term. As jobs have disappeared, part-time, contingent, and low-wage positions have replaced them, leaving many without full-time incomes (and, consequently, without health insurance) for perhaps years to come. As a partial response to this crisis, President Obama has made education, particularly funding for community colleges, a cornerstone of his economic agenda. He has emphasized that unemployed workers need to learn new skills and reinvent themselves for a global economy in which well-paying, unionized jobs have all but dried up.

The idea that higher rates of college attendance can stem the tide of recession becomes hard to swallow, however, if we consider that the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression has occurred simultaneously with a surge in college enrollment. In the early 20th century, a high school diploma was an elite credential. College access greatly expanded after the 1950's, when the labor supply of graduates was still small in a booming post-war economy. Since then, a college degree has become a ticket to the middle class. As a result, more people are enrolled in institutions of higher education than ever before. By 2008,

the Pew Research Center reported that almost 40% of 18-24 year-olds were enrolled in college, double the number from thirty years earlier ("College"). The grave contradiction in this arrangement has been the failure of the labor market to generate enough college-worthy jobs to keep up with the output of the education sector. This dissertation studying four basic writers at a non-selective, urban university will show that the clout of college credentials in the job market depends on the social class of the institution and its students.

The increasing demand for higher education has created an enormous education market which includes many non-selective colleges. These career-oriented colleges are both public and private, two-year and four-year institutions with typically low graduation rates. Those students who do graduate take non-elite degrees into a very difficult labor market that is saturated with credentialed workers for low-level jobs and with elite degree holders for the high-level openings. Many students, graduates or non-completers, leave college with significant debt which severely impedes their ability to make their diplomas pay off. This troubled connection between education and job success, especially for graduates at non-selective campuses, is the backdrop against which the stories in the coming chapters are set.

The four students studied in this dissertation, two men and two women, are all first-generation collegians and the children of immigrants. The successes and failures of these American 'strivers' raise questions about how effectively non-selective colleges put working-class students on the road to the middle class. Regarding the potential for upward mobility, a 2008 report by the Brookings Institute showed that class status at birth still largely determined one's eventual social and economic position. In recent years, the Brookings' researchers reported, eleven percent of children from the poorest families earned college degrees compared with 53% of children from the top fifth ("Getting" 6). Other studies have

also shown that the proliferation of non-selective colleges has not improved the graduation rates of low-income students (Sacks). Mass higher education appears to be a weak resource for the upward climb of most low-income families because low-budget (though not always low-cost) colleges tend to be pipelines into low-wage labor.

What do these macro-economic conditions look like at the existential level? To capture the lives partly shaped by quantitative realities, this dissertation presents a qualitative study of four non-traditional students in one non-selective, urban campus. By examining their trajectories through college in light of the statistical profiles that inform them, I contextualize these students' experiences at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York. This approach grounds case study research in theoretical principles while emphasizing the richness and complexity of individual lives.

To evaluate the students in their local and global circumstances, this study also brings critical social theory to the task of unpacking the 'bootstraps' or 'American Dream' myth. The difficulty of transcending one's social class has been studied by numerous sociologists. Leading theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Annette Lareau have argued that class status is transferred between generations and that class identity is confirmed by the reputation or "distinction" of the college attended.

This dissertation is also based in theory and research from the field of Composition and Rhetoric, particularly the sub-field of "basic writing" (remediation). Typically non-credit, basic writing has become institutionalized in non-selective colleges over the last forty years. It was required of all students featured in this study. As this dissertation will discuss, basic writing is a contested practice. Scholars have questioned what kind of curricula and pedagogies are beneficial to basic writers and even whether such a course should exist at all.

This dissertation engages those debates and examines the relationship between remediation and literate development in order to further contextualize the experiences and outcomes of four basic writers.

Chapter One introduces 'Carl,' the son of Jamaican immigrant parents. Carl graduated from LIU at the top of his class. In his valedictory address, he attributed his tremendous academic success to his own willpower and hard work and indicated that other students could use the same formula to follow his lead. Yet, Carl's "bootstrap" rhetoric elides important facts about his own autobiography as well as the big picture of who manages to graduate from college and how non-elite degrees are valued in the job market.

In Chapter Two, I analyze my interviews with Carl after he began his career on Wall Street. These interviews contextualize Carl's success by showing how he received extraordinary support for his academic development. More importantly, I discuss the dramatic impact on Carl's life of a four-year, full-tuition scholarship provided by a major blue-chip banking firm. Such unusual and unequally distributed advantages highlight the rare terms of Carl's success story. In that regard, Chapter Two also presents some of the methodological dilemmas of ethnographic research with participants who view their experiences very differently than the researcher does.

Chapter Three discusses the social and economic conditions of 'Andy' who enrolled at LIU-Brooklyn to prepare himself for a career in the health care field. Andy, the son of Guyanese immigrants, was very skeptical about what a college degree could offer him and whether it was worth the effort. Andy was literate in hip-hop and the grammar of urban living for young men of color. His vocational anxiety, his skepticism about college, and his

non-academic literacies suggest themes for a critical writing class which teachers might draw on to design curricula based in students' lives.

Chapter Four features 'Elizabeth,' a Latina who enrolled in college to earn a B.A. degree in her forties. Like Carl, Elizabeth benefited from close mentoring of teachers who facilitated her rise from basic writing to Honors, a rare academic feat for non-traditional students. Also like Carl, Elizabeth asserted that other students could emulate her success if they would only study hard. However, my interviews demonstrate how Elizabeth's success was not only the result of individual effort; her life story uniquely positioned her for success insofar as historical changes in women's roles supported her battle for autonomy in her own family. Yet, Elizabeth downplayed the feminist context of her experience and asserted that academic success for women like her is primarily a product of personal will, ambition, and the willingness to learn from hero-teachers.

Chapter Five features the story of 'Michelle,' a Haitian-born woman who spent six-years at LIU and went tens of thousands of dollars into debt to earn a college degree. First, this chapter focuses on the kind of reading and writing assignments that engaged Michelle and suggests how composition teachers might draw from the actuality of students' language and experience in curricula design. Secondly, this chapter discusses Michelle's post-college search for a middle-class job. Her difficulty finding employment after graduation and the tuition debt burden that she had accumulated raise important questions about the reality behind dominant educational discourses that link higher education with access to the professions. Non-selective colleges, I argue, may be fostering a kind of *lateral mobility* that is represented as upward mobility to striving students.

Chapter Six further theorizes the methodology of this dissertation by examining a conversation between Andy (the student featured in Chapter Three) and me. In this conversation, Andy exercised his own agency by turning my research into a potential benefit for himself. This incident confirms some postmodern critiques of ethnographic practice and illustrates how critical ethnography might help establish mutuality and dialogue between researchers and participants. Such mutuality also lays the groundwork for an ethnography that relates individual experience to macro-processes while still emphasizing the uniqueness and singularity of individual lives.

Chapter Seven summarizes the findings in this dissertation that non-selective colleges participate in social reproduction by representing the system as fair and open, by presenting lateral mobility as upward mobility, and by encouraging perceptions that academic success and failure are outcomes of purely individual effort and merit. I also summarize how remedial programs such as basic writing, which enable access to college for many working-class and low-income students, can certainly work for some but simply cannot turn the tide when there are few well-paying jobs at the end of a long and (for many) a costly college road.

Chapter One

'Where There's a Will, There's a Way': Starting at the End

On a sunny morning one May, students in black academic robes and families in their Sunday best lined up for commencement at Long Island University (LIU), a non-selective, urban institution in downtown Brooklyn, New York. The ceremony would be held on campus under a white canopy on a grassy field soon to become a diamond for the college baseball team. Next to the field was a large concrete quadrangle surrounded on all sides by towering campus buildings. This quad was filled with tables and chairs shaded by giant, billowing umbrellas. Food service workers in white and black uniforms were setting up grills and ice chests for the after-ceremony barbecue. Graduates, faculty, and officials from the college streamed onto the field and under the canopy, adjusting their black robes, hoods, and brightly-tasseled caps. On the stage, several distinguished-looking speakers studied notes and greeted administrators as they prepared to congratulate the graduates. It was a commencement ritual repeated every spring on many campuses across the country.

While commencement is a familiar rite-of-passage in American life, LIU's spring event also displayed important differences from ceremonies conducted at more prestigious colleges. Notably, LIU students are mostly first-generation college students and people of color from New York City and the surrounding counties, so the assembly that day was significantly darker-skinned and working-class. As a mass institution, LIU's ceremony does not feature an address from a national celebrity or receive press coverage like many elite colleges do. On that May morning, vendors lined the streets outside the campus gates selling flowers and teddy bears adorned with little graduation caps and carrying mini-diplomas. The

family members and friends of the graduates included children who had come to see their parents receive their degrees, another important difference from commencement at colleges like Harvard and Yale which typically graduate younger students without children of their own.

Besides its social class markers, the urban location of Long Island University is also notable because, despite its name, LIU is not on "Long Island"[1] itself insofar as "Long Island" in New York parlance signifies the suburban counties of Nassau and Suffolk farther east. Located in dense downtown Brooklyn, LIU's demographic changes over the decades have reflected the immigration patterns of New York City. Leonard Kriegel, who taught at the college in the early 1960's when the students were mostly of Jewish ancestry, described the campus and neighborhood as "particularly urban":

> It was much smaller and much poorer than [New York University or Columbia], and it was completely absorbed by downtown Brooklyn. The physical plant was on a postage-stamp-sized modernistic 'campus' . . . and was dominated by a conventionally ugly dormitory building that looked like a squared-off beehive. The student at L.I.U. was framed by the harsh lights and dead ends of downtown Brooklyn, a forlorn and cancerous region, stuck like a city blight between Ft. Greene and Brooklyn Heights and the Grand Army Plaza. (109-10)

In this description, Kriegel, who earned a PhD in English Literature at NYU, reveals the harshness of the setting in which immigrant students and children of immigrants sought higher degrees. Yet, what is most striking about Kriegel's observations is that they no longer describe the campus and the downtown area where the college is located. By 2006,

[1] In 1955, LIU opened a second campus in suburban Long Island.

downtown Brooklyn–including the neighborhoods of Fort Greene and Brooklyn Heights–had been effectively gentrified by middle-class and affluent professionals who had crossed the Brooklyn Bridge from Manhattan during the 1980's and 90's in search of more affordable housing and roomier accommodations. Aside from a few blocks surrounding an outdoor shopping center, the Fulton Mall, which caters to blacks from various Brooklyn neighborhoods, downtown Brooklyn looks today like a mini-Manhattan, dotted with expensive condos and high-rise apartment buildings. The campus itself, while indeed small and dominated by the same "beehive" dormitory Kriegel described, also has seen new construction since his day including a new Health Sciences Center, constructed in the 1990's, to accommodate students enrolled in the college's most popular major. The college's neighborhood, then, had decisively moved up in class, though few students at LIU could afford to live there.

In front of the Health Sciences Center, hundreds of graduates lined up to enter the Commencement ceremonies on that graduation day in 2006. Music spilled out of speakers placed around the venue, filling the air with hip-hop anthems and more traditional, celebratory instrumentals like "When The Saints Go Marching In." Just across the street from the campus above Junior's, a restaurant famous since the 1950's for New York cheesecake, a giant billboard read "LIU: Together We Can Change The World." This billboard featured an image of several black and brown hands reaching up towards something unseen, just barely out of reach. Hands reaching for more than they now hold and more than is within their grasp serves as a fitting iconography for a campus that projects itself as a ladder of success for striving students.

After more than 800 graduates were seated under the canopy, family and friends were allowed to enter the Commencement venue. Some pointed video cameras at the stage as they searched for their loved ones among the graduates while many excited children perused the sea of black robes for a glimpse of a parent. On this special day, several robed graduates waved to their professors already seated behind the podium. The faculty members were dressed in the multiple colors of their own distant alma maters because the vast majority had not attended LIU themselves; instead, they had reached the professoriate through elite campuses. Their many working-class students would not have been admitted to higher education only a few decades before, and this open access campus enabled some to now cross the threshold into a new, coveted identity as a college graduate. The faculty presence was a legitimizing marker of middle-class achievement and a sign of respect that confirmed the validity of the students' upward climb. Then, as the music died down, the crowd noise subsided and the speeches began.

Taking the podium first was keynote speaker Richard D. Parsons who, two years after this Commencement, would become the most prominent black corporate executive in America, a confidante in the Obama transition team. Parsons was formerly CEO of Time Warner before becoming Chairman of Citigroup in the Wall Street meltdown of 2008. Like many LIU students, Parsons was from a working-class Brooklyn neighborhood. He had attended two mid-rank institutions: the University of Hawaii and then Albany Law School, from which he earned his law degree. From these modest beginnings, Parsons had indeed come far. Grandson of a former groundskeeper for the Rockefeller family, Parsons joined Obama's inner circle as an economic advisor in 2008. He embodied the aspirations of many

of the students arrayed before him. Fittingly, Parsons began his speech by identifying himself as a Brooklynite.

> The first thing I want to say is that it is good to be home. The first time someone called me an SOB, I took it as an offense. Until I learned that being a Son of Brooklyn was a term of great endearment. I was born in this neighborhood: indeed in the shadow of this great university.

Parsons' humble Brooklyn background helped establish his "ethos," the rhetorical element of personal character and life story which projects sincerity to and identification with his audience. He started where the students had started and had risen to a great height. He was a kid from the neighborhood who became the CEO of a major media company and then of a major bank. As such, he exemplified the "bootstrap" narrative through which LIU and many other non-selective institutions appeal to low-income groups. In his speech, Parsons credited hard work and determination for his success. He also discussed the importance of family values to encourage college advancement, noting how his own parents taught him to succeed in life.

> They instilled in me the belief that with hard work, self-confidence, and faith, there was nothing I could not do. Like most of the young people in my generation, many of you have had to overcome some difficult challenges to get here today. Everything from low incomes to low expectations has conspired to hold some of you back. But for us, failure is not an option.

Parsons pronounced this last sentence with special emphasis and several in the crowd erupted in cheers, responding to the challenge in his words and to the coded racial discourse of his remarks which hinted at special obstacles to advancement for people of color. He concluded

by urging students to give back to their communities and stressed that they are the beneficiaries of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the famous Supreme Court decision finally ending the legal segregation of public schools. "*Brown* is a milestone on a road we're still traveling," he said, "traveling away from a past of mandated inequality for some toward a future of opportunity and justice for all." For Parsons, the brief mention of civil rights and his "road" metaphor selectively appropriated a history of struggle to frame the meaning of the moment. Yet, Parsons did not discuss why the *Brown* decision had in fact failed to erase school segregation in America. Indeed, he was looking out on a sea of black faces, not an integrated group of graduates or families. In this reference to the civil rights narrative, Parsons linked *individual* hard work and ambition to a legacy of mass activism that had already taken place and repositioned it into a lesson in personal perseverance.

After Parsons' speech delighted the audience, and before the degrees were conferred en masse upon the graduates, the valedictorian of the class of 2006 rose to speak. Carl Thomas, a tall, 22-year old, black man with an authoritative stride, approached the podium. Carl was born to immigrant parents who came to Brooklyn as part of an enormous wave of economic refugees from the Caribbean islands. A first-generation college student, Carl, the valedictorian, began as a remedial ("basic") writer, like so many of the first-year enrollees who enter LIU. His rise from the lowest level of higher education to valedictorian is a compelling story of academic success against the odds, an almost utopian narrative justifying open access and mass higher education. Carl's autobiography actually reiterated Parsons' self-representation, confirming the CEO's narrative of success through self-confidence and perseverance. The two, on that sunny day, were effective exemplars for the payoff of higher education, more or less bringing the campus billboard of upward-reaching hands to life:

"Together we can change the world." As did Parsons' keynote, Carl's valedictory address brought the crowd to its feet several times.

> Friends, my story is not unique, as I am sure many of you can relate to it. I am no different from you in the sense that we all live in the same neighborhoods, have the same interests, come from diverse backgrounds, and have attended the same schools. What this means is that we all have the same ability to achieve great success. True, some of us may be gifted with more physical or mental ability than others. However, the vast majority of us possess the same inherent abilities. One might ask why some people are more successful than others if the vast majority are so similar? The answer is simple. One of the most important factors that can determine your success is willpower. A very good friend of mine used to say, 'where there's a will, there's a way,' and that saying is absolutely true. A certain level of self-confidence, along with a positive attitude is required in order to achieve success. Success itself should not be measured by our material possessions or the number of zeros in our bank accounts. Here is how I like to think of success. First, setting goals and undertaking the necessary steps to achieve those goals. Second, helping others to achieve their goals, thereby becoming successful in their own right.

By downplaying accumulated wealth as a measure of success, Carl chose a high moral ground for his ethos. While Parsons emphasized the 1954 Supreme Court decision as the key that opened the door to opportunity, Carl, on the other hand, chose to emphasize service to others. Parsons was, by his mere presence, an exemplar of the American Dream; Carl, still a work-in-progress, wisely drew the rhetoric of commencement towards high moral goals.

After Carl's speech, diplomas were individually distributed to the graduates by the college president, David Steinberg, himself a graduate of Harvard. Many of those in robes who came onstage to receive diplomas spent six or more arduous years earning their degrees. Leaving the stage, diplomas finally in hand, the graduates descended into the crowd to be congratulated by their families and friends. Festive music, once again, started to drift from the nearby quad. These eight hundred graduates embodied the hopes of the more than 5,000 students still enrolled at LIU and the new freshman class that would take its place in a few months. They had received from both Parsons and Carl a singular rubric: *where there's a will, there's a way*. The Commencement, then, was a celebration of their truly remarkable endurance as well as the culmination of an argument about how that success was achieved: through willpower, hard work, and a positive attitude.

II

Commencement rhetoric originated in elite ceremonies marking a rite of passage for the mostly white, young men whose affluent families secured them a place in higher education and then in lucrative professions after graduation. Such rhetoric was later adopted by non-elite institutions after working-class children gained mass access to high schools early in the last century and then to public colleges in the 1950's and after. Of course traditional commencement discourse is *epideictic,* or celebratory, not polemical. Accordingly, these addresses present one-dimensional narratives bathed in 'ethos' (identification of the speaker's character with that of the audience) and 'pathos' (deep feeling of the situation) and not especially 'logos' (reasoned argument and analysis based in evidence). In the case of a non-selective campus like LIU, one among hundreds in the U.S., the theme of 'success through

perseverance' both captures and evades complex narratives based in students' material conditions. These other narratives concern how students contend with the institution that enrolls them, with the city that houses them, and with the economy that employs them. By studying Carl's story as well as the experiences, texts, records, and utterances of three other LIU students who, like Carl, began their college careers as basic writers, this dissertation will compare the relationship of ritual, institutional narratives like those featured at Commencement to the realities of college, off-campus, and post-graduation life for such non-elite students. I will use case studies to tease out alternative narratives that underlie the material conditions of these non-elite students. This dissertation, then, is an examination of how Carl's "willpower" narrative and Parsons' representation of the civil rights story as one of career advancement function in a college location where, for most students, willpower is a necessary factor for achievement but not sufficient by itself.

Decoding commencement-day rhetoric through case study research begins by taking a closer look at the differences between institutional rhetoric about the college experience. The Commencement I just described is similar to other graduation ceremonies across the country because the speeches and the meanings generated at such events are tightly scripted to follow tradition, that is, to offend no one in authority while congratulating the strivers moving on. In the case of LIU, a private, urban college, CEO Parsons was chosen for his exemplar status as a black man who pulled himself up by his bootstraps. Carl, a bootstraps-in-progress, represented himself as an everyman to the other graduates and extended Parsons' theme of 'success as a product of hard work and personal achievement against the odds.' Traditional and familiar, 'bootstraps' is a defining and iconic discourse in American life reiterated prominently at moments like Commencement. It drives the consummate national narrative of

the American Dream, a discourse that powerfully and succinctly represents *what is good, what exists and what is possible in society,* to draw on Goran Therborn's notions of how ideology functions to shape perception. Such dominant discourses (like "bootstrapping individualism") orient people to imagine, to embrace, and to enact a life of individualized goals that have a friendly fit with the way things are (*Ideology* 18). From another perspective, bootstraps iconography and the American Dream discourse comprise what Michel Foucault discussed as "regimes of truth," which circulate dominant values in society (*Power* 131). In *Discipline and Punish*, for example. Foucault described the social formation of the self as a structured production of "docile bodies" which fit busily and compliantly into the status quo. "Discipline," Foucault wrote,

> may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets: it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by 'specialized' institutions (the penitentiaries of 'houses of correction' of the nineteenth century), or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end (schools, hospitals), or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power[.] (215)

Foucault identified institutional settings like schools and hospitals as specific sites in which disciplinary power circulates to produce docile bodies that "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (136). Such a complex network, in other words, informs people inside the institution's walls of who they are and what they should do and can accomplish in such circumstances. Each disciplinary site is a structured activity constantly surveilled and

organized by hierarchical standards for judging individual performance. In Foucauldian terms, then, a site or an institution is an embodied discourse. The point of studying implicit and explicit institutional discourses is not simply to "discover" where or with whom power resides but, more importantly, to examine how power circulates through the activities and bodies of individuals in the apparatuses. Foucault's close inspection focused on what he called "the capillary level" of experience, that is, the ground-level experiences where bodies are organized and distributed in space (167). At the level of everyday experience, Foucault proposed that we could examine the 'micropolitics' of disciplinary structures as they 'cellularized' human subjects, that is, divided a mass into singular beings at work within the terms and limits of the setting. The case study method in this dissertation is a way of focusing on the 'cellular' and 'capillary' levels that Foucault theorized, in this case, the individual stories of several students making their way through a specific institution at a specific time and place.

LIU's Commencement itself may be further understood within some of Foucault's critical terms. First, obviously, the entire enterprise is in an enclosed space controlled by authorities who set the parameters of the exercise. Indeed, commencement is an exercise copying aspects of military process, which Foucault saw as foundational to disciplines in general. Key speeches are selected by those in charge to fit with dominant discourses of school and society and the formality of the event makes dissent from traditional themes unlikely. It is an intimidating moment, an awesome spectacle, an enveloping place of authority. In this moment of organized power, Carl's remarks were well-suited to the mythology of the day. For example, he explained that his story "is not unique" though he was indeed a rare student who graduated *in only four years*. During Carl's tenure, LIU posted an

average *six-year* graduation rate of only 21% and this figure is even lower for students of color on that campus.[2] Carl's progress was thus unusual, not typical, but that was not the story he represented. In this regard, then, Carl evaded his own unique status in favor of an address whose themes mystify economic and institutional realities. To do otherwise, Carl would have had to opt for a different rhetoric, one that would be a high-risk choice for a new college graduate like Carl embarking on a promising career.

III

Carl, the high-achieving exemplar, is one of the students whose story I will feature in these pages in order to examine the differences between the ritual narratives of graduation day and the contradictory stories of everyday experience in and outside the institution. I examine Carl's and three other students' biographies through the lens of critical social theory, particularly in relation to Foucault's theories of power and discourse and to Pierre Bourdieu's framework of unequally-distributed forms of capital in society. As I suggested above, Foucault asserted that dominant discourses function as "regimes of truth" which establish "the ensemble of rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true" (*Power* 132). In this regard, Carl's speech emphasized willpower and hard work as keys to his college achievements, implying that perseverance is the moral core of success. This picture of his world even downplayed the financial payoff of academic and professional success which is understandably high in student yearning. For

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[2] According to Education Trust statistics, LIU is part of a large group of similar non-selective institutions that post low graduation rates. Of the twenty-five most similar institutions grouped by Carnegie class, three had six-year graduation rates below 20%, and all but four had rates below 50%. See <collegeresults.org>.

Carl, willpower was a moral means and an end in itself; it was the high ethic explained solely at the cellular, or personal, level. Such an ethic was how he got where he is and, like virtue, is its own reward. Carl's version of what is "true," then, is embedded in a logic that has a friendly fit with the institution's logic. He and Parsons both represented success in purely individualist terms, which Foucault might describe as an ideology for "docile bodies," that is, for busy compliance with the status quo.

In addition, Carl's insistence that willpower and effort are keys to academic success acknowledged that students like him have to take advantage of the limited means available to climb the ladder. Because non-elite students don't have the material resources to attend the best colleges, or to attend college without working long hours for income, and because they lack family connections to get the best jobs, they must patiently and doggedly accumulate whatever "distinction" (to use Pierre Bourdieu's term) is possible. Bourdieu argued that "distinction" was one lens through which to explain the mechanisms through which social classes reproduce themselves with scant mobility from generation to generation. The unequal distribution of cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital based on class, race, and gender orients dominated groups to develop "a taste for the necessary," which Bourdieu understood as "adjust[ing] their expectations to their chances, defining themselves as the established order defines them" (471). For Carl, such an adjustment required that he attribute to himself the personal characteristics of "strength in the sense of labor power . . . and strength of character, courage, and manliness" (479). Thus, Carl's assessment of his achievement and the discourses bound up in that assessment "misrecognize" social factors as merely personal ones and evade a critique of racial, class, gender, or other forms of inequality in society, according to Bourdieu. The result is that Carl's description of his

success makes the college and the status quo look fair and open, offering opportunities to those who deserve it. Such an ideology throws the onus for success or failure solely on autobiography (personal drive or character) while avoiding the global context (the already-existing inequality which conditions who will succeed).

IV

In avoiding the subject of societal inequality, Carl displayed rhetorical skill at Commencement by representing institutional fairness. In doing so, he helped construct the status quo as a kind of discursive utopia, a Panglossian best of all possible worlds, or at least a world not in need of major improvement. Utopian rhetoric at Commencement elides the actual relationship between a non-selective college and its mass student constituency and between college-attendance and the job market into which such students graduate. Like Carl, the majority of LIU's 5,500 undergraduates are people of color from New York City and the surrounding area. Their average family income is $31,000, less than half the average of families at LIU's suburban Long Island campus. It is also significantly less than the median family income for New York City which, according to the US census, was more than $49,000 in 2006. Most undergraduates are in fact women working part- or full-time and many are raising children while attending college. Tony Scott described such students as those who "don't fit the image of the college student from popular media. Neither privileged nor particularly profligate," Scott wrote, "most don’t party their free time away on fraternity row; few enjoy much leisure time or do a semester of study abroad; few have the space in their lives for activist politics; and few take raucous spring break vacations in exotic

locations" (9).[3] Tuition costs are also particularly burdensome for students at LIU where the fees for Carl's class were a hefty $729 per credit hour, twice the rate then charged at the City University of New York, the major public higher education facility in the area. Despite the high cost, LIU'S admission criteria are non-selective and relatively low by traditional standards. The college does not require incoming students to submit SAT scores nor does it require a minimum high school GPA. Admission to the college is conducted on a rolling basis and most students who apply get in. There is no deadline for admissions applications as long as students enroll in classes before the end of the first registration period, usually about three weeks into the semester. Students can apply, be admitted, and begin taking classes within a matter of days. These facts translate into convenient access for students and into steady annual tuition-bearing enrollments for the college.

Historically, access to college for students like those attending LIU is subsumed in a 20th century narrative of "open door" higher education for non-elite groups. In the early 20th century, college access was barely a distant dream to most students as only 6% of Americans at that time had even a *high school* diploma. But by the 1950's, after one million World War II veterans had gone to college at government expense in the first mass access to higher education in U.S. history thanks to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, a college degree became a marker of middle-class status and a key to upward mobility. According to Jean Anyon, between 1979 and 1999, the number of college graduates in the labor force increased by over one hundred percent (*Radical* 36).

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[3] A 2009 study by Public Agenda reported that only about one quarter of all college students fit the traditional description of 18-22 year olds attending classes full-time and living at residential campuses ("With Their" 3).

Since the 1960's, minority groups and women have also seen large gains in access to higher education. By 2003, the number of African American, Hispanic, and other minorities enrolled in college reached the highest levels in history. Only 13% of college-age African Americans were enrolled in college in 1967 compared to 31% in 2004. The percentage of 18-24 year old women in higher education has also increased steadily since the 1960's. In the 1980's, for the first time, more women than men were enrolled in college and women have continued to outpace men in college attendance, retention, and graduation rates.[4]

While these statistics suggest that college access has become more available to previously excluded groups, non-elite students are still not graduating in proportionally greater numbers. Like the local "access and excellence" theme at LIU, national statistics of increased college access mask a bleaker picture. The 20th century has also been marked by startling and increasing disparities between elite and non-elite students in both college enrollment and graduation rates. Though the U.S. has one of the highest rates of college *attendance* in the industrialized world, it ranks near the bottom in the proportion of students who compete their degrees.[5] Historically low graduation rates for low-income students have also not improved. In 2007, Peter Sacks wrote: "…[t]he chance of a low-income child obtaining a bachelor's degree has not budged in three decades. Just 6 percent of students from the lowest income families earned a bachelor's degree by age 24 in 1970. And in 2002, still only 6 percent did" (B9). At LIU, only about 8% of students will complete their degrees within four years (as did Carl). Twenty-one percent will graduate within six years (compared to a national six-year rate of about 55% for Division I campuses). Even more troubling, some

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[4] National Center for Educational Statistics
<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d05/tables/dt05_184.asp>
[5] *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept. 15, 2006, A24.

students who do earn bachelor's degrees do not find great demand for their skills. According to Anyon, despite increases in the number of college graduates in the labor force, "by 1990, almost 20% of graduates–6 million college-educated workers–were not able to find college level work" (*Radical* 36). She also cited research that puts a significant percentage of bachelor's degree holders among the working poor (19). Of course, college graduates in the aggregate continue to hold a substantial wage and employment advantage over adults who only complete high school. Yet, the payoff for a degree from a non-selective, mass institution like LIU is depressed by the low ranking of the college and by local economic conditions which favor graduates from the Ivy League for high-wage, entry-level positions.

This challenging situation for non-elite college students and graduates illustrates how high the stakes are for basic writers who are among the least likely to complete college. Thoughtful representation of these realities, of course, was missing from the stories provided by Carl and Parsons at Commencement, and a reasonable argument can be made that such material is inappropriate for a festive occasion. Still, it is possible to ask how such questioning might have been enunciated as a forward-looking call for concerted action for community interests. But neither Parsons nor Carl approached such a discourse. Perhaps a CEO like Parsons has a staff writer who prepared his public remarks; Carl, undoubtedly, had no ghost writer available and composed his own speech. All drew on the already-articulated, widely-circulating script of the "bootstraps" story. Because dominant narratives are already inside us when we come of age, Carl and Parsons wrote their own speeches at the same time that their speeches wrote them. This dissertation will examine that script as it shapes itself in several case studies of non-elite students whose pursuit of a costly degree at a non-selective college is simultaneously inspiring and questionable.

V

While Commencement-day discourses at LIU inscribed the 'bootstraps' myth, alternative discourses are available generally in society and particularly in professional debates about basic writing, a course that served as the gateway to college for all of the students in this study. This dissertation is grounded in the alternative, critical discussions of basic writing which have populated the professional literature since Mina Shaughnessy "invented" basic writing at City College in the 1970's.[6] The coming chapters will highlight the work of scholars such as Marilyn Sternglass, Peter Dow Adams, and Mike Rose who argued in the 80's and 90's that remedial programs actually inhibit non-elite students from graduating. Since then, other Composition scholars have turned their attention to local sites where relationships between non-traditional students and an unequal society play out. For example, in her analysis of the history of remediation at CUNY, Mary Soliday argued that remedial courses have never functioned to improve students' literacy skills or, in turn, their graduation rates. Instead, basic writing courses serve institutional imperatives like the need to "boost enrollments while espousing standards" and to "fulfill certain commitments to access for historically underrepresented groups" (62). Soliday challenged traditional narratives about what it takes for basic writers to succeed by asserting a socio-economic context for student need. Affordable housing, efficient transportation, adequate income, and accessible childcare would greatly improve low-income students' performance in college regardless of the curricula they encounter in basic writing classes, Soliday argued. She concluded that we

[6] Some scholars assert that it is erroneous to categorize basic writing as a curricular category that emerged in the 1970's at City College. For examples, see Lerner and Ritter.

need to examine institutions to theorize the relationship between basic writing courses and extra-institutional circumstances that function as barriers to academic success and economic advancement.

Soliday's work built on scholarship in institutional settings where the promises of college access are reinforced by commonplace narratives about the capabilities of basic writers. In "Basic Work and Material Acts: Discrepancies and Disjunctures of Basic Writing and Mainstreaming," Tom Fox and Judith Rodby described one program's decision to eliminate basic writing. They pointed out that students at their campus were increasingly disgruntled that they had to take basic writing for no credit. The basic curriculum was also mired in assumptions that students needed to perform simple, basic tasks like narrative description before they could move on to more complex, analytical assignments. In such an environment, students produced work that was of little value to themselves or to the academy. "Basic writing classes," wrote Rodby and Fox, "had produced basic writing" (86), a concern expressed in David Bartholomae's widely-debated essay "Inventing the University." As a result, Rodby and Fox decided to eliminate the program and, instead, provide students with a one-credit "adjunct writing workshop." The workshop gave students a forum to get extra writing support while they were enrolled in the same first-year writing course as other students. Their decision to eliminate basic writing reflected recent research on how people learn to compose. "One learns to engage in a particular writing practice by being engaged in that practice," they concluded, "and not by learning some other writing practice with the idea that the latter prepares writers for the former" (88). In an ironic turn, the authors dismissed arguments that remedial courses serve as an access point for non-elite students. "We eliminated basic writing courses," they wrote, "because of our commitment to broadening

student access to the university and its ways of using language and literacy" (84). Thus, they argued that, at their college, basic writing had become an obstacle to students' academic progress.

The work of Soliday and Fox and Rodby illustrates how focusing on college access alone does not address the economic and academic factors, including widespread myths about literacy learning, that inhibit students with a poor prior social investment in their development. Bruce Horner also acknowledged that the challenges facing non-elite students are much larger than the question of whether to sustain or eliminate basic writing. He asserted that the very existence of Composition as a profession is dependent upon an inexhaustible supply of basic writers who don't meet traditional literacy standards. As part of an effort to establish its own legitimacy, Horner wrote, the field "left unchallenged particular notions of 'academic excellence' and how the achievement of such excellence by basic writing students and their teachers was ultimately to be measured" ("Discoursing" 208). In other words, in its founding years, the field ensured a place for itself in the academy by functioning as the arbiter of student (in)ability according to an ill-defined set of standards that were supposedly as obvious as they were static. The institutionalization of basic writing and the need for professionals to assess students' literacy problems assured some academic prominence for the Composition profession (though not necessarily prestige). As more non-elite students entered college, basic writing posed itself as the first rung on the ladder to academic and professional success. Such a discourse obscured the material conditions, including unequal access to valuable forms of capital, that produce failure and social inequality. Dominant rhetoric about how people succeed in institutional contexts, then, ultimately informed the themes at LIU's Commencement. As this dissertation will show, such

moments of pageantry and official story-making mask the richness and complexity of the literacies students bring to college and prompt troubling questions about what college success ultimately means for non-elite students. In the next chapter, I continue exploring these themes as I follow Carl's story from his moment as celebrated exemplar and Commencement speaker to his post-college life as an upwardly-mobile graduate and corporate employee.

Chapter Two

Bootstrapping at Work: From 'The Ghetto' to Wall Street

Carl was a worthy valedictorian and a fitting complement to CEO Richard Parsons at Commencement. As an ensemble, they presented a "before and after" demonstration of how bootstrapping can look and work. As I stated earlier, Commencement ceremonies emerged from within elite universities that shaped this traditional closure to college long before mass higher education entered the American cultural mainstream after the 1950's. As a cultural icon, commencement signifies a dual rite of passage, two celebrations folded into one. First is the transition from adolescence to adulthood and second is the move from school to work. Such a consequential dual passage certainly applies to some LIU graduates including Carl, but this traditional framework largely breaks down when non-elite collegians are the aggregate subjects of study. Commonly on an urban campus like LIU, many students assembled at commencement have already been working for years and some left adolescence behind decades before. In this chapter, I will discuss some of Carl's experiences, pre- and post-graduation, precisely because he clearly articulated and embodied the dominant themes of upward mobility through willpower and hard work (the bootstraps narrative).

Carl's parents came to the US from Jamaica as economic refugees in search of opportunities for themselves and their children. Carl's mother, who raised Carl and his sister as a single parent after the death of her husband, had briefly attended LaGuardia Community College but did not complete a degree. Carl explained that college was his commitment to his family's legacy. "I want to finish what she [mother] started," he said. Carl hoped that education was one way he could carry out his own mother's hopes and dreams and, perhaps,

improve his own circumstances along the way. This bootstraps narrative, then, includes obligations between generations which characterizes the stories of the other students in this study as well: older family members providing shoulders for the younger ones to stand on and then the younger ones paying back the gift of their elders who sacrificed for them.

After his triumphant debut at graduation, Carl began a full-time internship as a Financial Analyst at JP Morgan, a prestigious Wall Street investment firm, the same company where he had worked part-time during college. With the two major landmarks signaled by Commencement behind him–college completion and employment in a good job–I met Carl on campus for an interview about a month after graduation. Carl looked even taller since earning his diploma. In his collared shirt and dress slacks, he exuded even more confidence than he had as a student. To my eyes, he had become the kind of person who, after being given a lot of attention, now commanded it. Seeing this new graduate, newly-employed on Wall Street, reminded me of the long road he had traveled to get here. In his Commencement speech, Carl had emphasized how similar he was to other students at LIU ("friends, my story is not unique") and, like many of his fellow students, Carl's journey began in an underfunded, overcrowded public school, Automotive High, a key place and time in his development.

Carl attended Automotive in Williamsburg, Brooklyn because he had been labeled "vocational" due to poor academic performance. New York City students with low grades, low test scores, and uncertain college plans are tracked into weak public high schools that emphasize job skills and training for technical careers as the life path for such young people. In this regard, Carl's high school, like others serving non-elite boys and girls, tracked students into what Bourdieu called a "cultural capital" of low distinction in the habitus of the

working-class (170-1). At Automotive, students were taught how to work in a repair garage, a career that had in fact once appealed to Carl. Most students in this vocational school, however, did not take such studies seriously. The New York State Department of Education lists the graduation rate for Automotive High at 44%, but Carl says the rate was even lower. "There were maybe 700 students in my class," he said. Four years later, "only about 70 people graduated." According to Carl's account, teachers at Automotive also had low expectations of students because most were not expected to go to college. "The school," Carl said, "placed little emphasis on academics." Carl also described Automotive as a chaotic, overcrowded environment plagued by absenteeism. He said that if he completed the school day without getting pulled into one of the fights always breaking out in the hall, he considered it a good day.

Carl's journey from a dumping ground high school for non-elite students to an non-selective, urban college includes the important intervention of two 'teacher-heroes' who managed to nurture Carl's potential despite what he describes as a "poor learning environment" at Automotive. Two math instructors there, 'Ms. Sprenz' and 'Mr. Hale,' showed an ambitious, young Carl how to maneuver from a low-achieving life path to a higher one, from a future of fixing cars towards a possible six-figure salary at a Wall Street firm (a narrative perhaps recently stalled by the financial crisis of 2008 with its many firings and lay-offs). When I asked Carl about Ms. Sprenz and Mr. Hale, he described them in the same terms in which scholar Mike Rose, in his famous autobiography, had described his own savior teacher, Jack McFarland. Carl's exceptional mentors found time to meet with him after class for individual support sessions; they assured him that he was smart and capable and, eventually, they urged him to leave the vocational track and enroll in a small program for a

handful of college-bound students at Automotive. Carl also described his two teacher-heroes as serious-minded educators who wouldn't let students down while expecting a lot from them. "She used to say," Carl said of Ms. Sprenz, "'you can be from the ghetto but you don't have to act like it.'" This kind of message resonated with Carl who came to believe that, to maneuver from "the ghetto" to Wall Street, he would simply have to assume a new attitude and exhibit new behaviors, effectively displacing the obstacles of his origins with an uncompromising drive and ambition. Jennifer Trainor argued that the kind of advice Carl's teacher offered him is part of an "emotioned universe" of schooling in which students learn over and over that success is dependent on a positive attitude and on personal responsibility. Lessons like these, in fact, are how teachers and administrators attempt to persuade students to commit to tasks that students consider "a waste of time" (96). In the high school Trainor studied, for example, students were "repeatedly told that their destiny was in their hands if only they maintain the right attitude" (97). Such advice, Trainor explained, undercuts attempts by educators to foster critical views of systemic inequality built into the status quo which structures failure for the vast majority of students born to lower-income parents. This was certainly the case at Automotive where Ms. Sprenz's well-meaning words were an early lesson which Carl would repeat at graduation: personal willpower trumps cultural background, including socioeconomic conditions. Like *Lives on the Boundary* author Mike Rose, who was switched from "voc ed" to the college-prep track by an alert teacher who discovered that Rose's test scores had been confused with those of another student, Ms. Sprenz was the driving force who helped move Carl onto a higher track where he could re-imagine himself as college material and where he could start accumulating some cultural capital of distinction. She encouraged him to enroll in the college-prep business program at

Automotive, which he did. Carl certainly had talent for the higher track and was a promising prospect, but the role of an individual teacher as talent scout, mentor, guide, advocate, and transmitter of cultural capital of high distinction was crucial. Carl's mentor's investment was a multi-year, intense tutorial through which he gained the minimal cultural capital necessary to embark on an upwardly mobile life path. This intense tutorial relationship between a novice and an adult mentor is an instance of Lev Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," or "the distance between [a learner's] actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (86). In such a zone, discourse becomes an instrument driving cognitive development because it enables re-perceptions and situated knowledge acquisitions that are largely ignored, undeveloped, or unarticulated in non-elite zones of traditional teaching.

In the shelter of a small academic enclave at Automotive, Carl met his second mentor, Mr. Hale, who introduced him to options Carl did not know about, like a college scholarship with J.P. Morgan, the famous Manhattan investment firm that offers a small number of full-tuition, four-year grants to students from New York City public schools. After college graduation, the J.P. Morgan students are awarded full-time internships at the firm with the potential to be hired as full-time staff following a probationary period. Carl reported doubting that he would win the scholarship since he was competing with more than a thousand other students, some from the City's elite high schools. But in a zone of proximal development with Mr. Hale, Carl applied and received an astonishing letter of "congratulations!" a few weeks later. The award also included the promise of part-time work at the firm while he was in school. "I was shocked," Carl said, "absolutely speechless." A certain kind of distinctive

cultural capital played a special role in Carl's winning the award because he composed a strong personal essay for his application, a rhetorical genre for upward mobility that he mastered with tutelage. Carl had written about being the son of a single parent and explained that he wanted to do what his mother had been unable to do by finishing college. He also highlighted his high school accomplishments. By his senior year at Automotive, Carl had the second best academic record in his class and he had begun taking courses at a local college on the weekends. Carl attributed much of his success to Ms. Sprenz and Mr. Hale. "In effect," Carl explained in an especially moving moment in his Commencement speech, "they jumped into a car that was heading off a cliff, and helped steer me back on the road to success." The mediating role of special advanced outsiders in changing Carl's life path cannot be overstated.

Like Carl's two hero-teachers, the J.P. Morgan selection committee had ample reason to be impressed by Carl's commitment to academics in a high school that did not emphasize college preparation and did not boast a high graduation rate. The metaphors attending scholarships for non-traditional students frame a story that congratulates both donor and beneficiary. While J.P. Morgan discovered a 'diamond in the rough,' Carl did bring 'a lot to the table' at that moment, like the fact that he was already taking college classes while still in high school. In any event, Carl distinctly benefited from intense mentoring that rescued him from getting lost in the overcrowded, understaffed chaos at Automotive High School. Some years later, he was on his way to the podium at LIU Commencement, standing next to CEO Richard Parsons, two proofs that the bootstrapping dream was indeed available.

Yet, while the Parsons-Carl ensemble confirmed the American Dream of opportunity through hard work, the fine details indicate just how rare the terms of Carl's success are. The

timely intervention of two mentors in high school plus the rare award of full-college tuition from a blue-chip banking firm are simply not generally available to most students, including many aspiring, urban students from working-class backgrounds. Despite Carl's statement at Commencement that his story is "not unique," what rescued him is clearly unique and uniquely limited. Such intense academic tutoring and institutional mediation by teachers on behalf of non-elite students in an understaffed public school (or a non-elite college) are rare. Some get it; most don't. This means that only a fraction of urban students will get an essential investment in their development. Consequently, too few of these high school students go on to college and only about seven percent of lowest-quartile students complete college in six years, according to a study by the Pell Institute ("Moving Beyond" 13). Further, as I describe in more detail in "Chapter Five," non-selective graduates are competing in a local job market filled with degree-holders from elite campuses whose social and cultural capital provide them distinct advantages.

Carl's scholarship plucked him from the obscurity of mass experience and catapulted him suddenly to an elite level of possibilities. Once there, he had the good sense to take the ball and run. He studied with driving ambition and continuous hard work. Certainly, another life had been staring Carl in the face. Had he become a vocational graduate of Automotive High School, perhaps edging into college but without the financial backing that made all the difference, he may never have joined a line of strivers on a narrow road to prosperity and security.

Carl's two hero-teachers were not the last ones to recognize Carl's potential. One LIU instructor, Professor 'Shawn', referred to Carl, whom he had as a freshman, as "one of the most talented students I have ever taught." He explained that, though Carl started out the

semester as a quiet student whose essays were too short and undeveloped, he quickly became one of the most vocal students in the class and his writing improved dramatically over a short period of time. When I mentioned this professor's remark to Carl, he explained that Professor Shawn simply told him, "Carl, your essays are too short. You have to write more." By this stage in his development, such minimal input from a teacher was all Carl needed. He began turning in longer, more developed pieces shortly thereafter, finally earning the top grade in the class. "Once I knew what [the professor] wanted, it was easy to do well," Carl said, indicating that other students could emulate this strategy if they would only try. "Some students just don't take advantage of all the opportunities they have," he explained. Carl deserved his good fortune, but his Commencement address representing himself as an everyman failed to account for the limited supply of the special benefits that changed his own life.

By the end of Carl's four years at LIU, he had taken full advantage of his opportunities and had put his tremendous talents to the test. He approached his college goals with an incredible speed and adeptness simply not possible for most other students to emulate, especially those without scholarship aid, or those working long hours at low-wages, or those raising children. Carl, childless and funded, was able to double major in Accounting and Finance while minoring in Art. Astonishingly, he told me he also wanted to complete a second minor in Philosophy but his advisor cautioned him against it. Some semesters Carl registered for as many as 20 credits at LIU and he never earned less than an 'A' in any class while also working part-time at J.P. Morgan as a Financial Analyst. Of his unbelievable ability to juggle responsibilities, Carl said:

> It's just that I enjoyed everything. I enjoyed it all. I think that's what really got me through everything. . . . In fact, I could have done more. Because I enjoyed it so much, [college] really wasn't a burden. It was what I wanted to do. So if you're doing something you really want, it's not going to be hard at all.

Certainly, Carl's academic effort and ability to balance school, work, and life would be exceptional in many institutions, but especially so at a non-elite site like LIU where Carl had developed a disposition of ease around people in authority and an ability to cultivate relationships to his benefit. A quick study and a likeable person who claimed to enjoy school from the beginning, he earned top grades from the start. Carl also figured out how to accumulate social capital (connections, networks, advocates, supporters). A well-known student on campus, Carl could be seen walking the halls shaking hands with many friends, always with a smile and a friendly word. He seemed to have collegial relationships with several faculty members and, once I got to know him during interviews for this research, he would occasionally stop by my office just to say hello and inquire about how things were going. I deduced that he probably spent a good deal of time "making the rounds" on campus, seeking new friends and maintaining old connections. Unlike Andy and Michelle, whose stories appear in Chapters "Three" and "Five," Carl claimed to have spent his four years at LIU enjoying his academic pursuits while he cultivated many relationships with peers and faculty alike. In fact, Carl told me that he broke up with his long-term girlfriend, a CUNY student, before their junior year because, he explained, "she was only registered for twelve credits. She was just lazy." She was, in other words, insufficiently ambitious for the high-flying Carl. Still, the J.P. Morgan scholarship was the keystone of this narrative, the economic base on which the academic success story could assemble.

I discuss this history of Carl's years at LIU to examine the material terms through which a student exemplar emerged. But, as I stated earlier, being an exemplar is not the same as being a replicable model because Carl's special economic conditions and unique academic mentoring in high school enabled his progress in ways not available to most students. In recognizing that the tuition scholarship secured the path to academic success which had been opened by his two mentors, I also wondered why Carl failed to mention the scholarship's life-altering implications in his valedictory speech. The scholarship freed Carl from paying tuition and incurring debt, a truly uncommon advantage for a student at a non-selective college. Perhaps just as importantly, J.P. Morgan freed Carl from having to look for a job after graduation, eliminating a tremendous source of stress. Carl's scholarship was an early shot in the arm that helped him feel immediately capable of academic success and supported his further development. By winning J.P. Morgan's support, Carl nested in the arms of a powerful corporation whose prestige obliterated many obstacles–financial as well as psychological–on his journey to the podium at Commencement where he summarized his feat as merely a result of willpower, plain and simple. Perhaps this facile summary was an audience-pleasing over-simplification, a disguise or filter to hide the real terms of his achievements which are not available to the majority of non-elite students. In Carl's Commencement discourse, then, which represented the door to success as open to any with the personal willpower to succeed, he repaid his debt to the system that enabled his success by painting an appealing picture of the world he and the other graduates inhabit. His narrative not only repaid his benefactors; it further secured his own place among them.

II

I also want to emphasize that Carl (and his signature "willpower" theme) played a large role in my own development as case study researcher. I listened to Carl's Commencement speech just as I was beginning to draft this dissertation. I had already met with him once to ask him to become a subject of this research. Carl immediately agreed to participate even though, at that time, I did not know exactly what I would write about him in this text. I selected him as a research subject on a hunch that his college success would prove an important counterpoint to the mixed stories I was already collecting from the other students featured in this dissertation. Soon after graduation, I asked Carl why he chose to focus on willpower in his speech when it seemed to me that his scholarship had been far more important. My leading question left him a little surprised so he paused to think. The following is a transcript of our conversation:

Carl: Yeah right around the time I got to college . . . there was no pressure because I was going to school for free so there was no pressure anymore.

Ann: Well, this is a good point, right?

Carl: Yeah, yeah.

Ann: Most students don't go for free, right?

Carl: Exactly and maybe that's one of the reasons certain students don't do as well as they could because some have to work just so they can pay for college or others . . . all the amount of debt they accumulate.

Ann: Yeah.

Carl: With me, I just had to go to school . . . so it's not really a worry.

Ann: So not having to pay made you able to . . . the willpower came partly from not having to pay?

Carl: Yeah.

Carl's answer to my question showed me that, when faced with a leading question, he could agree to a more complex perspective on "willpower." As a researcher, I was fascinated and troubled by this apparent other-knowledge Carl could articulate when explaining his success. As I wrote before, Commencement is a high profile, public ritual that makes it risky for any podium rhetors to deviate from the standard script. Even if he had articulated a critical discourse at commencement, which he did not, for Carl to speak truth to power in that setting–enunciating that his unique corporate-funded scholarship was exactly the economic support generally needed by all LIU students to overcome race and class factors obstructing their college progress–would be risking career suicide. To use James C. Scott's framework for discourse in society, speaking truth to power means uttering "the hidden transcript" in a public setting and the price to pay for doing so can be great (4). However, I found myself wishing Carl had tested this critical theme at Commencement. My research confirmed the central role of financial factors in his success, so I wished he had enunciated an alternative discourse by addressing how not paying crushing tuition and not having psychological burdens of deep family debt helped channel his exceptional ability into stellar grades. However, on the Commencement stage, he confirmed the bootstraps story as the singular narrative. In his role as research subject for this dissertation, Carl revealed the contradictions of self-representation embedded in narratives of success and failure. The way Carl chose to tell his story, in other words, risked none of the benefits he needed to succeed in a college

eager to showcase him as an exemplar ready for the job market. Carl was moving on to probationary employment in the corporate world where discourses about inequality could put him at even greater risk whereas, during our interviews, he was more free to talk about the material conditions that enabled his success.

Carl's admission during our interview that willpower was not the whole story is another instance of Vygostky's "zone of proximal development." Because I was the older person and the teacher in the exchange, my critical discourse may have had a pedagogical effect on Carl's development, drawing him forward into articulations he did not enunciate on his own at Commencement. Vygotsky's theory about development through social interaction and dialogue with more advanced peers suggests that Carl, or any other student, may learn critical views of society through interaction with such discourses in classrooms but this hardly guarantees any student's desire or ability to embrace dissenting ideology or to risk such discourse in a high-profile public setting like Commencement.

In sum, then, Carl is a subject partly constituted in and through dominant discourses that displace critical reflection on experience. A critical reflection on the traditional script appeared only later in during our interview. In his speech, Carl described material conditions of scarcity at the bottom of society as richly available opportunities with personal responsibility decisive in success or failure: How hard do you work? How badly do you want it? How well have you taken advantage of the opportunities out there? Success or failure, according to this logic, are outcomes totally under personal control. "You can be from the ghetto," one of Carl's hero-teachers advised him, "but you don't have to act like it."

III

Carl took his teacher's advice, graduated from LIU, and began as an intern at J.P. Morgan training as a Financial Analyst, the job he had been looking forward to all along. As I began drafting this dissertation, I did not see or speak to Carl for several months, but I thought of him often. While writing about the basic writers featured in these pages, Carl was the ghost in the machine, the happy, successful exemplar whose story served as the backdrop against which other students' narratives of academic fear, financial stress, family drama, and vocational anxiety played out. Carl's descriptions of his college experience were so drastically different from what I was hearing from other basic writers that I began to think of him as someone who existed more as a character in a utopian story than as a student in real life. I wondered if his post-college experience out in the "real world" of work would disturb the utopian discourse. What would Carl say about his role as valedictorian a year later? Would he tell the same story about willpower and hard work?

I met with Carl about a year after his graduation, tape-recorder in hand. As with all students featured in this dissertation, however, my role as a case study researcher had ceased to completely define my relationship with Carl. I was, by then, very invested in his success. I wanted Carl to be the same achieving, enthusiastic person that I had interviewed before. But I also knew that Carl was more of an adult now than when he was a student and that the challenges of young adulthood might prove more difficult to explain in tidy narratives of ambition, hard work, and redemption. On the subway ride from Brooklyn to Manhattan I wondered if the excitement and pleasure he took in being an academic star on campus had been dulled by a year of full-time work in a corporate environment. At LIU, Carl had been a big fish; at J.P. Morgan, he would be one of hundreds of Analyst-apprentices working for a

large company. I imagined that Carl's story of his triumphant rise from vocational high school wouldn't be as compelling to his J.P. Morgan bosses who would be more focused on his job performance.

I got off the subway at Grand Central Station on a steaming July day and waited on the corner of Park Avenue for Carl to emerge from the giant steel and glass building that houses J.P. Morgan's midtown headquarters. Carl was late. As I waited, I watched a constant stream of office workers with ID badges clipped to collars and briefcases hurrying in and out of the building. Carl finally came out, but I didn't recognize him at first. He sent me a text from his blackberry and, once we identified each other, he waved from across the street. We quickly found a table in a bustling café filled with well-dressed office workers from the area. The café was loud and we sometimes had to strain to hear each other. Physically, Carl had indeed changed from a year before. He was no longer the skinny kid who regaled the crowd at graduation. He had put on a few pounds and, though he was still slim, he looked like an adult to me for the first time. I soon learned, of course, that working at J.P. Morgan did not leave him much time to exercise or eat healthily. As a new corporate employee, Carl had traveled a great distance from Automotive High School in both cultural and economic terms. Domestically, however, he had stayed very close to home. Carl still lived with his mother and sister (though he could have afforded to rent his own apartment) and he rode the subway to work each day across the bridge that separated glittery, bustling Manhattan from his residential Brooklyn neighborhood. He often ate at his desk or on the run and rarely made it to his mother's apartment in time for dinner. There was also a hint of serious fatigue behind his eyes. I asked Carl immediately how many hours he was working. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

Ann: What are your hours like? Are you working like a dog? Because you hear about all these corporate jobs that are 80 hours per week . . .

Carl: It's about that. . . . It's up to fifteen [hours] a day and some weekends.

Ann: Are you serious?

Carl: Yeah. It varies.

Ann: Carl!

Carl: That's why it's been hard and you haven't seen me or heard from me in such a long time.

Carl explained that the hours he spent at work were quite typical. Everyone he knew at his level of the company worked fifteen-hour days and only sometimes got weekends off. When I asked Carl if he knew in advance that this kind of commitment was the norm, he shrugged. "They [management] don't care how many hours you work. It's about getting your work done." He also explained that taking twenty credits per semester at LIU had prepared him a little for the long hours and the sleepless nights. Despite getting a lot of headaches from lack of sleep, he said he felt up to the job. In Bourdieu's terms, Carl's new position required an enormous expenditure of his most valuable asset, his "fighting strength," the blunt force of his physical power to labor (384). Rather than resent this system, he took pride in being able to work productively under the terms of his employment as a professional and under the same terms apparently expected of all of the firm's lower-tier employees, regardless of background. In fact, Carl explained that he had taken on the role of being a mentor to new "minority hires" at the firm. "Most of your co-workers are white, I'm sure," I responded. "The

majority," Carl said before adding, "it's a very diverse firm. . . . They are very committed to diversity." Carl admitted that employees at the firm were mostly white in the same sentence that he characterized the company as "very diverse." I did not point out that there seemed to be a contradiction in the firm's rhetoric and the reality of a mostly white staff. About his role as mentor to "minority hires," I asked Carl what advice he offers them. "Just work hard," he said.

In a firm with hundreds of employees, Carl, still an intern, was at the low end. In this environment, his admonition to his fellow employees to "work hard" was no longer the easy sentiment of a commencement speech genre. It was a lesson born out of a concrete reality of long days under a management that expected nothing less if he wanted to keep his job. As Carl took a bite of his sandwich, I asked him what I had been waiting a year to ask:

Ann: You talked a lot in your [graduation] speech about willpower and a good attitude and working hard . . . is that how you still feel or have things changed in the last year?
Carl: No, I feel the same. I still have the same outlook. I think something else that I said is that at any point, you don't know when you're going to leave this Earth. . . . So while you're here, why not try to do the best you can. . . . If you look within yourself and try to maximize your potential, you have to have the willpower to go forward.

Carl confirmed that his sense of what it takes for a person to "maximize [his or her] potential" had not changed, though I sensed a slightly more downbeat tone in his voice since his statement now included a comment on the inevitability of death. As our brief conversation came to an end on that summer day, Carl went back to his desk at the J.P.

Morgan offices carrying a take-out box (he didn't have time to finish his sandwich). I asked him, mostly out of curiosity, if he noticed any class differences between himself and his fellow employees at the firm. I said that I imagined some people came from affluent families. Carl replied, "Oh yeah. It's expected when you work on Wall Street. . . . It doesn't bother me." He explained that class differences are apparent to him when people talk about going to their house in Connecticut or playing golf, a sport Carl had never tried. "You think that will be you one day? Playing golf at your house in Connecticut?" I asked just before Carl turned to go. "I don't know. I don't know," he shrugged. "I like Brooklyn. Brooklyn's fine with me."

Riding back to Brooklyn, I began to develop an analysis of Carl's post-graduation experience. My initial reading of Carl's statements went something like this: Carl's continued reliance on discourses of willpower, hard work, and personal responsibility was evidence of his uncritical acceptance of a mythology that completely denied any structuring force in society beyond will and ambition. In other words, he had taken the rhetoric of 'willpower' that he had used to define his success at LIU and imported it to a new setting where it stretched and strained under its new responsibility to explain and justify crushingly long work days in a vast corporate army. Carl had registered for twenty credits per semester *voluntarily* at LIU. At J.P. Morgan, overwork was compulsory; it was simply expected that employees would devote almost every waking hour to the job. Such demanding labor had adapted him for his new employment so much so that it "continuously transformed necessities into strategies, constraints into preferences," as Bourdieu wrote (175). Moreover, what Carl had to do to survive in this environment became more than a source of his own satisfaction and pride; it became his advice to new employees. It seemed to me that 'willpower' had become less an explanation than a mantra, a way for Carl to push himself

forward through the fatigue and long hours he had found at the place he hoped to be when he began his escape from Automotive High.

As I described earlier, my first interview with Carl taught me a lot about how to look for contradictions between what a research subject might say in a commencement speech, for example, and what he or she might say when asked a leading question in a one-to-one interview. Our last interview was equally instructive for me because, as I reflected on it over time, my initial reading of Carl's post-graduation experience began to change. Three years later I have come to see that my interviews with Carl may suggest a lot more about my own views than his. This helps illuminate some of the limitations and possibilities of case study research, topics I will continue in the next chapter. Looking back, for example, I think I was disappointed in what I read as Carl's uncritical acceptance of an unequal system that rewards good jobs to exemplars like him while other students are perhaps made to feel that they do not have enough willpower or aren't working hard enough to merit success. I was also disappointed that he didn't criticize his corporate employer more openly. Yet, my disappointment in Carl served me well as it enabled my own argument. I wanted to use Carl's words about his fifteen-hour work days in a "diverse" firm with little diversity as evidence that a non-elite college education did not prepare Carl to become an engaged citizen and adult employee who could critically reflect on his own circumstances. As a graduate student researcher and apprentice professional in a liberal arts field, I projected my values onto Carl, exporting my own material conditions onto his which were dramatically different. In the end, I am as much a social product of my situations as he is of his and our situations are not comparable. After more reflection, reading, and discussion with others, I began to see that I cannot fully account for why Carl said what he did during our final interview and, most

importantly, I cannot discount how his location as a recent college graduate in a new and vulnerable position may have shaped and limited his responses to my questions. I cannot expect Carl to share my interest in class inequality, nor can I assume that Carl's words to me are evidence that he held stubbornly to an uncritical view of his circumstances. He may very well know more than he feels free to say given the terms of the arrangement through which he became the showcased exemplar.

There is still another explanation for Carl's responses to my questions that I did not consider on that day. It is possible that his comments in his graduation speech and during our final interview suggest that Carl was experiencing what social psychologists call "stereotype threat." Claude M. Steele has defined this as "the social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies" ("A Threat" 614). In retrospect, even in a majority non-white institution like LIU, Carl may have felt that he was being asked to fill the role of the successful black student who studied hard and made good. Some of his comments may represent his resistance to being assigned this role. In that regard, Carl may have been in an awkward position. He was a high-achieving student from a group (black men) stereotyped as not particularly good at school. Though his academic achievements ensured that he could *not* be reduced to the stereotype of the Black underachiever, it opened him up to being stereotyped as the Black exemplar, perhaps equally disabling. As Steele wrote, the fear of being labeled or stereotyped does not depend on a student's "internal doubts" about his or her ability (614). Carl certainly presented himself as confident and capable. The anxiety of stereotype threat is not, then, a psychological state in which a student begins to internalize others' views of his group (what W.E.B. DuBois called "double consciousness"). Rather, "stereotype threat" is a result of a

student's particular social situation in a school or in society that shapes academic identity. In retrospect, Carl's statements to me, in the words of Steele and his colleagues, "show a distinct desire . . . not to be seen through the lens of a racial stereotype" ("Contending" 384).

In retrospect, Carl's words about his working life now sound careful, as if he avoided saying anything that could be held against him, as if he knew what was expected of him and what price he might pay for letting down his guard. Carl's statements, in other words, are not necessarily evidence that he truly believes that willpower and hard work are still the keys to success; instead, he may have deployed such rhetoric as a defensive strategy to manage others' impressions of him, what Erving Goffman called "impression management" and what rhetoric scholar Keith Gilyard admitted doing in his own upwardly mobile autobiography *Voice of the Self*. Carl's sentiments about 'willpower' and 'working hard' in school and on the job, then, are contradictorily adequate and inadequate to explain the requirements of his current location or the terms of the journey that brought him there.

My initial reading of Carl's comments as evidence of his own inability or unwillingness to question the status quo, then, says as much about the potentials and limits of case study research as it does about Carl's views or his relationship to LIU or to J.P. Morgan. In "Protean Subjectivities," Janet Alsup cautions researchers to remain ever vigilant about their own assumptions.

> Asserting that full understanding of these participants has been reached as a result of the researcher's hard work, intelligence, or keen insight into the research context . . . is an oversimplification, and, as such, surely incorrect. The researcher sees merely one slice of the lives, personalities, and subjectivities of her participants, and she should not pretend to have deeper knowledge. (229)

Alsup warns that researchers should not assume they know more than they do about the people they study. In my initial analysis, I was too quick to fit Carl's comments into an argument I had already constructed about how the 'bootstrapping' discourses of graduation had followed Carl to his new job. While his post-graduation views did seem unchanged, the image of Carl as an exemplar champion of the status quo is a far too simple one. By assuming Carl was telling me exactly how he really felt, I risk reducing his remarkable progress from Automotive High to J.P. Morgan, to a lucky break whose meaning can only be understood in terms of how it serves a larger argument about the durability of institutional discourses transported seamlessly from one context to another. Carl's rise from Automotive High to the podium at Commencement and beyond is an extraordinary story of academic and professional advancement. Whether he had secret doubts about the role of willpower and hard work in his success, *I can never know for sure*. I do not reflect on my initial assumptions about Carl in order to absolve myself of any ideological complicity or, as Bruce Horner wrote, to guarantee my own "professional worthiness" to make statements about the meaning of other people's lives ("Critical" 27). Rather, I want to conclude this chapter by noting that, at the end of my ethnographic research, I found myself at *a place of knowing and unknowing* at the same time. Perhaps this is where ethnography will and should ultimately lead. Coming face to face with the unknowable in human experience shifts the researcher's emphasis from fully understanding Carl, or any other person, to carving out an informed position from which one can practice ethical research and teaching strategies that can further the interests of non-elite students. These are themes I will explore in the next chapter where I introduce 'Andy,' an LIU student who did not share Carl's views that college was an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Chapter Three

'Real Beef is War': Subject Matter and Writing Instruction

A case study, like a biography, is singular to the extent that no life is identical to any other in its myriad of specific detail. At the same time, all human subjects are formed in specific locations which subject them to social logics of formation, that is, normative ways of being, doing, seeing, speaking, knowing. Regarding the subjects of this study (first generation, urban college students), they belong to a diverse population that shares distinctive material conditions which they must contend with though all do not contend with them to the same extent, in the same way, or with the same result.

This chapter will study the social and material conditions of 'Andy', another LIU basic writer, who typically viewed his college struggles as an individual quest to improve his and his parents' lives through hard work and sacrifice. Like Carl, who I discussed in the previous chapters, Andy was a young man of color who came of age in a very expensive city characterized by hard times for working families, rising costs of living, stagnant wages, limited good jobs, declining access to higher education, and dangerous streets for young men of color especially. But, unlike Carl who won a prized scholarship, unfunded Andy voiced doubts from the beginning about the eventual payoff of his diploma. His occupational anxiety about whether a college degree was a good economic investment was accompanied by a second anxiety not voiced by the other students in this study. Andy feared distancing himself from a cherished urban youth culture that had little allure for Carl. Andy's case, then, is a second illustration of the broad forces that structure experience in a nonselective college and the small maneuvers through which individual actors negotiate their place in that world. Such

maneuvers are part of what Michel de Certeau, in his study of "bricolage," called "an art of being in-between," or how individuals improvise or "make do" within limiting circumstance (30).

Andy's particular "art of being in-between" presented itself to him as an assimilation threat, that is, requiring that he move into a dubious and alien college world which threatened important aspects of his home identity and culture. This assimilation anxiety raises curricular questions for educators regarding appropriate pedagogy for non-elite students in college writing classes. In fact, in a continuing disciplinary debate, Composition scholars have discussed "students' rights to their own language," (Parks) as well as "hybrid discourses" (Bizzell) and "community literacy" (Flower), in addition to the larger question of where subject matter in writing classes ought to come from (Shor). In this chapter, I will review relevant aspects of this debate and discuss how Andy's cultural and economic anxiety addresses it. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by discussing the possibilities and limitations of integrating narrative and analytic elements in ethnographic accounts of human experience or, more concretely, I will address the question: what might critical ethnography look at, look for, and look to do?

Andy's Story

So you finish college and it's wonderful. You feel so good . . ./ Hey now you'll get that 25 thou job a year . . ./ So now you get your degree tattooed on your back you're so excited about it/ If you continue to work at the Gap, after several interviews/ Oh my god!/ You'll come in at an entry-level position and when you do that/ If you kiss enough ass, you'll move up to the next level/ Which is being a secretary's secretary!/ And boy is that great. You get to

take messages/ For the secretary who never went to college/ She's actually the boss's niece/ So now you're a part of the family!

---------Kanye West, "School Spirit Skit #1"

Even in the urban universe of LIU, Andy stood out from other students for what he called his "thug" style. He could often be seen walking the halls with his baggy, hooded sweatshirt over his head, his face down and white ipod cords hanging from each ear, disappearing into the pocket of his oversized jeans. To the outside observer, he looked like he was walking to the beat pulsating in his head, only half paying attention to the rest of the world. He sported a ragged goatee and he often wore ball caps with team emblems. His hoodie (he usually wore it in black or gold) was his trademark piece of clothing and he wore it all the time, even in warm months. Andy also wore a belt to cinch his baggy pants up just below the waist.

Andy's footwear was no less stylish. He wore the brown Timberland work boots favored by hip-hop stars and urban fashionistas. But Andy's boots were not brand name; they were knock-offs. Andy also carried a backpack well-stocked with protein bars and energy drinks. He bought these items (though he occasionally boasted that he stole them) from the health food store where he worked twenty hours per week for about $8 per hour. Working in a health food store had also made Andy conscious of his physique, he reported. He lifted weights at the LIU gym to maintain his biceps and keep his weight down. At first, I read Andy's clothes and body type as a role he played to project an image of a cool, tough guy who didn't take all of this college stuff too seriously. At the very least, Andy's urban street style and general nonchalance marked his difference from other students at LIU, especially

from the majority who were female. My first impression of his aloof insouciance communicated a discursive message: *I am not one of you; I am only passing through*. Later, though, as my research progressed, I realized that, in Andy's case, the relationship between nuanced identity and surface demeanor was more complex than I had imagined because his studied indifference masked a deepening frustration and despair.

Andy was the American-born son of immigrants from Guyana. His parents worked first as home health-care aides[7] and then assistant nurses at a Brooklyn hospital. Andy's parents encouraged him to go to college even though they had not graduated high school and pragmatically pointed him to a career in the health care field because a shortage of health care workers assured that he could find a job. In this instance, his family's material conditions (working class) typically constructed "college" as an unapologetically vocational project undertaken for occupational necessity, or what Bourdieu in *Distinction* called "a taste for the necessary" developed by class habitus (178). Following his high school graduation, Andy first tried to enter a nursing program at a Manhattan hospital but his test scores on the entry exam were not high enough for admission. As an alternative, he enrolled at LIU in Fall 2005. After he earned a low score on the writing entry exam, the same one-hour impromptu that had landed all the students in this study in basic writing, Andy was placed in the first of two courses in the remedial sequence. In a brief time, then, two separate institutions had deployed high-stakes, timed literacy tests that threw obstacles in Andy's path. Andy had already been constructed as a cultural deficit in need of correction/remediation by the time he enrolled at

[7] The home health care service sector is one of the fastest growing industries in the US. Social assistance jobs in the health care field account for as many as one-third of all private sector jobs in Brooklyn and Bronx. Most of these workers are immigrant women who receive low pay, work long hours, and receive no benefits (Mcgeehan).

LIU. After successfully finishing his general education courses, Andy elevated his own career goals by deciding to pursue a major in Physical Therapy because the starting salary for physical therapists was then in the low 50's, slightly more than for nurses. He was a young, working-class man who was well-attuned to the vocational realities around him.

Andy, like many students at LIU, often expressed vocational and economic anxieties. He was well aware that his parents were counting on him, their only child, to prepare himself for a profession so that he could earn more than they did. During one interview, Andy confessed that his "worst fear" was failing them. "I'm spending so much money that they don't have," he said.[8] Then, almost as an after thought, he added, "My mother couldn't have any more children. She's living her dream [of becoming a nurse] through me." Andy was surely not alone in feeling anxious about his occupational future or in his fears that he would disappoint his family. Michelle, who I discuss in "Chapter Five," expressed such occupational anxiety and, though Carl's occupational future was more secure, he too felt deeply committed to his family's unmet needs.

In addition to the pressures he felt to make his parents proud, Andy, like many working-class students, had to take time off between his first and second semesters of college. Andy's "stopping-out" period was necessary because his twenty-two year-old cousin was shot and killed in Staten Island by street criminals. Andy explained that he was too devastated to return to school and his mother had suggested that he take a break from his

[8] During Andy's first year at LIU, tuition was $691.00 per credit hour. His bill for one semester was more than $8,000.00, all of which he paid through student loans.

studies.[9] Andy enrolled in his second semester of college, then, in the fall of his sophomore year and became a participant in this research.

Andy often expressed a desire to complete his degree so he could, in his words, "get out of the ghetto" where the kind of violence that took his cousin's life was too close for comfort. Despite his determination to change his circumstances and to satisfy his parents, Andy also admitted to being conflicted about life as a student. Some of his ambivalence seemed to stem from his belief that getting an education meant giving up a part of his ethnic Guyanese and urban black cultural identities. The following excerpt from an interview with Andy took place when he showed up with a new over-the-shoulder book bag instead of his usual two-strap backpack, which he constructed as the urban bag of choice.

Andy: Do you like my new bag?

Ann: Yeah. It's nice.

Andy: Do I look whiter now?

Ann: Not really. Well, maybe a little (laughing).

Andy: Yeah I figure I'm starting to look a lot more like these students. These idiots.

I was immediately taken aback by Andy's condescending reference to his peers as "idiots" but, at that time, I did not ask him directly about his choice of words. Instead, I focused on the fact that, to Andy, an over-the-shoulder bag was more like a briefcase, something white professionals might carry to the office whereas his backpack, which he had used since high

[9] Murder is the leading cause of death among New Yorkers age 15-34. Black men and boys make up the vast majority of murder victims and about one-third of all such homicides are never solved (McGinty).

school, was associated with a younger, urban student crowd. Andy's fears about becoming "whiter" and his negative comment about other students are important considering Andy's fellow students were also young men and women of color. His sentiment suggests that, for him, "whiteness" travels beyond mere skin color to become a style of being, a way of speaking, dressing, and accessorizing which mark people of any color. Sociologists Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard have also explained that such sentiments are not originally a product of Black youth culture. Rather, stereotypes that associate academic success with whiteness have been "institutionalized by policies and practices" and "grudgingly accepted by Black children in school" (*Young* 36).

It is possible that there is another explanation for Andy's condescending attitude towards his peers at LIU. As I discussed in "Chapter Two," Carl's insistence that willpower and hard work are the keys to academic success may suggest his resistance to being racially stereotyped as a Black exemplar. As part of his own resistance to the stereotype that black men are not academically inclined, Andy may have cultivated a certain distance and hostility towards school culture, what Claude Steele called "disidentification" ("A Threat" 623). "Disidentification," Steele wrote, is a "domain specific measure" in which subordinated and stereotyped groups dissociate themselves from school outcomes (623). In other words, though such groups may perform poorly in school, their performance does not impact their self-esteem. Such students, like Andy, protect themselves by acting as if school is not important or by asserting that those who do succeed in that domain are "idiots" who don't understand how the world really works. This strategy, according to Steele, may have also helped Andy persist in school despite his reservations because he did not associate academic performance with self-worth or intellectual ability.

Andy's fears about how college would change him bring to mind Richard Rodriquez's famous sentiment in *Hunger of Memory* that, by getting an education at a prestigious institution (Stanford then Yale), he had lost his childhood, the comforts of his extended family, his native Spanish, and his bonds with his Mexican immigrant parents. While at Stanford, Rodriguez's economic gains were immediate. He gained sufficient social capital to connect to a well-paying summer construction job. After graduation, Rodriguez's Stanford pedigree, in his eyes, had permanently and fortunately reduced the consequences of being dark-skinned in America because with his high-status cultural capital he would not sink into the life of "los pobres," as his mother called them. Such economic and cultural status is of course what makes a Stanford or Harvard degree worth $45,000/year to families who pay their children's tuition. Andy's position, however, is very different from Rodriquez's because Andy is not a scholarship student earning a literature degree at an elite institution. Andy's discourse of expectations is modest and uncertain: a job as a physical therapist after earning a degree at a costly, though decidedly non-selective, college. Like Rodriguez, Andy feared losing a comfortable and familiar home identity and these fears led him to express sarcasm towards other students who he constructed as self-deluded wannabes. His desire to distance himself from his upwardly-mobile college peers may have also encouraged Andy to cultivate what anthropologists Bourgois and Schonberg called the "personae of the enterprising black 'outlaw,'" a racialized, masculinist stereotype that enables subordinated black men to keep up appearances in the face of anxiety and a loss of control (87).

When I asked Andy about his negative view of "these students" even though he was more or less one himself, he explained that that he believes most students at LIU do not see the truth of their circumstances. "College don't guarantee you nothin'," he said. Andy, it

seemed, didn't expect to gain much from pursuing a college degree. Completing college might enable him to "barely make $30,000 per year. And you can't live on that in New York," he said. I challenged him on this assertion by pointing out that the salary for a physical therapist, his chosen profession, is higher than $30,000/year. Andy agreed but argued that his student loan payments would eat into his income for years to come, severely reducing his take-home pay. Referring to his fellow students, he said: "we're all sharks fighting over the same scrap of meat." To support this claim by an appeal to authority, Andy produced his ipod and insisted I listen to a couple of tracks from Kanye West's 2004 album *College Dropout* including the song "All Falls Down":

> Man I promise/ She's so self-conscious/ She has no idea what she's doing in college/ That major that she majored in don't make no money/ But she won't drop out/ Her parents will look at her funny.

Andy explained that West's bleak view of the promises of higher education resonated strongly with him. He went on further to decry required courses like basic writing and liberal arts: "Why do I gotta take history from the 1500's and shit?" LIU's general education requirements were quite typical of American colleges, imported into mass higher education for non-elite students from the Ivy League. Requiring broad distribution courses in Humanities and Sciences before students could enroll in a major, this "gen ed" model took over higher education after 1900 and was finally codified by Harvard in its new curriculum of 1945 (*Rhetoric and Reality*; Berlin 229). Andy's vocational impatience suggests that non-elite students may experience liberal arts requirements as a class luxury that is too costly or irrelevant. Andy said he wanted to get some kind of professional training as a health care worker. Why did he need general humanities courses? In this exchange between us, I did not

confirm Andy's hostility to gen ed nor did I defend the Humanities requirements. Instead, I noted that he had performed fairly well during his first two semesters of college, earning a 'B' average. I wanted to encourage his confidence in dealing with the demands of the status quo which neither of us had the power to change. He smiled and said that some of his teachers were nice and he "got a good vibe" from them. If the teachers are "relaxed," he explained, learning and doing well is easy. Still, for Andy, coming to school was like a job without pay standing in the way of a paying job. He often repeated that he wanted to "get in and get out" so he could cash in on his degree as quickly as possible. Unlike Carl, Andy was not having a rewarding experience in college.

His anxieties were generated in good part by his deep fears about making enough money to support himself after completing college. Andy said that he had friends who had found quicker ways to make money by dealing drugs or through other illegal activities. Once again, Andy's feelings were mirrored back to him in West's song "School Spirit Skit #2":

> You go man, then when everybody says quit/ You show them those degrees man, when/ Everybody says hey, you're not working/ You're not making money/ You say look at my degrees and you look at my life.[10]

Hip-hop texts expressed the values and meanings of Andy's experience to him. The discourses of the college curriculum were not legitimizing given how he lived and imagined

[10] West's album *College Drop Out* dealt with the futility of college attendance for economic mobility. In *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, Jeff Chang discussed how the disappearance of manufacturing jobs in New York City created the conditions for the rise of hip-hop. "By the mid-seventies, average per capita income dropped to $2,430, just half of the New York City average and 40 percent of the nationwide average. The official youth unemployment rate hit 60 percent. . . . If blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor," Chang wrote, "hip-hop would arise from the conditions of no work" (13).

his world. The authoritative discourses articulating his conditions were not only from hip-hop but also from youtube. In interviews, Andy often suggested I listen to songs on his ipod or watch youtube.com videos when he was trying to explain something about his neighborhood or about urban street culture (more on this later). Andy's fears about his future and his anxiety over the costs of college are reasonable readings of his material conditions, one could say, not invented excuses. These fears were based in the low-wage work, high-cost of living, and the racial barriers many face in a competitive urban job market.[11] Andy seemed to have learned from a combination of instinct, experience, and hip-hop discourse that upward mobility requires a network of factors and difficult-to-accumulate forms of capital working in concert.

Andy's ability to read the conditions embedded in his material world is also apparent in an essay he wrote for a basic writing class during his second semester at LIU. The assignment asked Andy to describe two different neighborhoods in New York and to discuss the reasons for the differences that he sees. He reported this assignment as a rare opportunity to write about his experiences for a school essay and approached the task with uncustomary relish. His essay "Traveling Distinction With-in Sub-Boro's [sic]" includes a description of his neighborhood:

> In East New York the kids are hanging out on practically every corner. The majority of people wear hoodies, boots, jeans, fitted caps, du-rags and jeans. Loud music being played in the streets while sneakers hang off telephone wires. There are corner stores which in my neighborhood we call bodegas, that just give you the

[11] During the 2008-09 economic recession, black workers in New York City were unemployed at a rate four times higher than whites, a margin larger than the national average (McGheehan and Warren).

> necessary essentials to get by: milk, white bread, water, and dutchies [cigarettes]. . . . A police officer on practically every corner at night. The neighborhood is full of liquor stores about 1 in every 5 block radius. The restaurants are limited to only Chinese, Mcdonald's, Wendy's and other fast food restaurants.

After describing the sights and sounds of East New York, Andy goes on to narrate a subway ride he took from his neighborhood to the more affluent area of Park Slope, Brooklyn.

> I departed off the F train . . . and the first thing I noticed was how well maintained the train station was. There was no garbage on the floor, nor any graffiti, or the smell of piss. When I arrived at the street level . . . the primary thing that grabbed my attention was that there were no kids hanging out on the corners, nice houses, and front yards are clean. While walking around . . . I was startled when I realized there were no liquor stores, instead there were wine shops. . . . Furthermore, the corner stores had a variety of healthy foods such as pumpkin juice, nuts, mineral water, different varieties of white bread, whole grains, and wheat bread.

In the section of Andy's essay where he explains the reasons for the differences he found, he cites a *New York Times* article given to him by his instructor to help him explain the significance of the different kinds of food choices people have in different neighborhoods.

> According to 'New York City Health Disparities' Diabetes as a cause of death per 100,000 people in a low-income neighborhood (East NY) is 43 compared to 13 in a high-income neighborhood (Park Slope). . . . As you can see, the restaurants in the low-income neighborhoods are not the healthiest choices.

Andy concludes his essay by arguing that the inaccessibility of healthy, affordable food in

some neighborhoods is evidence that "discrimination is alive and well in our city." His final question in the essay is a telling plea: "Who is to blame for this quagmire?" It is important to note here that Andy's writing about specific details of two neighborhoods in Brooklyn captures Bourdieu's insistence that class-based habitus forms bodies (what he called "hexis") not just consciousness (206-7). Andy's essay also offers a number of different themes (the intersection of race, class, and food choices; how diet and food options effect health, etc) that a critical teacher might take up to design a writing course around such student-centered topics discovered in their experiences and observations. Though Andy is sharp (but not unique) in his powers of observation, this sample of school-based writing is evidence of his potential ability to link specific local practices with the social factors that partially determine them. Andy's assessment that "discrimination is alive and well" in his city is a race- and class-coded observation that could serve as springboard for his further development as a critical reader and writer.

II

I was just beginning to gather data on Andy's literate potential when, a few weeks into our interviews, he failed to show for one of our appointments. Since it was unlike him not to at least call when he couldn't make it, I called his cell phone but got no answer. A few days later, Andy came in to explain. He said he had been "in lock up" on Broadway in Lower Manhattan. He and a group of friends were on the Lower East Side a few nights earlier and they got into a fight with another group. A policeman on patrol pulled up to end the fray and Andy was arrested for carrying a knife as a concealed weapon. "I expected better of you," I scolded like a disappointed parent when he told me the news. "I know, I know," he said

sheepishly. I asked him what it was like in prison. He laughed nervously and said he was incarcerated with "a bunch of forty year-old bloods and crips." Despite his laughter, he seemed jarred by the experience. "Man, I don't want to be like that when I'm their age," he said, "still fighting over stupid shit." I told him that he is smart and capable but he needs to make some decisions about who his friends are. "Yeah," he said, "that's what my moms keeps telling me." "Why would you resort to violence to solve problems?" I asked, now addressing him like a middle-class college teacher and leaving behind the scolding mother voice.

This question prompted Andy to explain what he called "beefin'," a term that describes threats and violence between men in the neighborhoods where Andy and his friends live. He said that beefin' is part of the "culture of the 'hood"; it's how men and boys assert authority to gain respect from other men. "See, the guys we fought [on the Lower East Side] think what is happening is beef. It's a game. It's how you get a reputation for being a tough guy," he explained. When I said that I recognized what he was describing as part of mainstream hip-hop culture too, Andy agreed. "Fitty Cent is a purebred gangster," he said with admiration. "[Fitty] turned beefin' into an art." Andy also showed me a youtube.com clip of hip-hop producer Jim Jones explaining "beef." In the video, Jones is wearing a black shirt and a thick, gold necklace. As he talks, he reclines on a chair in what looks like a recording studio:

> I tell you the game is about machismo, who's the macho, bravado….It's about who's the biggest, you understand? . . .You got butterflies all the time when you come outside. You're paranoid, you dig? Beef is what Tupac and Biggie was into.

> That's beef. To make it past twenty-five in my neighborhood is like a miracle right now. ("Jim Jones")

Statistics on youtube showed that the Jim Jones video had been viewed over 165,000 times. I told Andy that I was suspicious. It seemed to me that Jones was playing a part, that his persona as a tough guy who explains beef also perpetuates his own reputation as a tough guy and keeps the mythology of beef alive. Andy insisted that it was not an act, but a genuine description of the world he inhabited. "People just try to have pride any way they can," he explained. "Me and my boys, we was taught loyalty."

It occurred to me during this conversation that Andy enjoyed representing this world to me, a culture he knew I knew little about. He seemed to get a kick out of showing me video clips and explaining song lyrics to me as much as he enjoyed, at times, inhabiting the role of a "thug" because such posturing enhanced him as an interesting subject for this dissertation. At the same time, Andy seemed to genuinely fear for his own safety and for the real violence that the culture of beef inspired. Perhaps part of his enjoyment when explaining beef to me involved role reversal; in these moments of his tutoring me in hip-hop, he became the teacher and I became the student. Acting as my guide to his world may have helped Andy use his own pedagogical discourse to assume some authority. In addition, educating the teacher about the hip-hop culture he knew well was also a way for him, I think, to manage his fears because he used a symbolic tool, discourse, to push the violent material a certain distance away from him. All in all, such moments of reversal enabled him to share his expertise and claim authority in the teacher-student relation.

III

During the summer of 2007, between semesters when he was not in class, Andy and I spoke on the phone several times. He seemed happier than he had been in a while. Andy also expressed a lot of gratitude to me for listening to his problems and for giving him so much of my time. I felt a little uncomfortable that he felt grateful to me because my interviews with him were going to benefit me in the writing of this dissertation. This was a feeling that frequently preoccupied me during my research with students. I wasn't sure how much I had done or could do for Andy, despite his claims to the contrary. During our last phone call that summer, Andy told me he would stop by my office during the first days of the fall semester to say hello. He said he was looking forward to coming back to campus.

But he never came. The first two weeks of the semester passed and I did not hear from or see him. I knew one of the professors whose class Andy had registered for so I asked her about him. She said his name was on her roster, but he hadn't shown up to class yet. What had happened to Andy? Had he decided to drop out of school at the last minute? It was unlike him not to at least call to explain his absence. Because I already felt like a concerned parent, I called his home and spoke to his mother. She seemed to know who I was when I introduced myself but was reluctant to talk to me. She confirmed that Andy was "fine" and that there was nothing to worry about. She didn't want to say more. I sensed a great deal of worry in her voice, but didn't press for more information.

Talking to her reminded me that Andy's parents had left behind a life in Guyana to give themselves and their son a brighter future. They were borrowing tens of thousands of dollars to send Andy to college only to watch him struggle to find a job, stay in school, and stay out of trouble as a young, black man on the streets of New York. In December 2007, *The*

New York Times profiled another immigrant mother, Musu Sirleaf, who had so feared for her son Augustus's future in a Staten Island housing project plagued by poverty, drugs, and violence that she sent him back to the war-torn country of his birth, Liberia, rather than risk him growing up in the ghettos of the inner city. Four years later, upon her son's return, he surveyed his old group of Staten Island friends: "…he counted five in jail. A warrant was out for his cousin Frederick, and an 18-year-old had been found dead in a third-floor stairwell next door" (Barry). Such was the fate that Augustus's mother had gone to such great lengths to help her son avoid. Ironically and sadly, these immigrants came to New York precisely to find security and advancement, but saw their sons especially vulnerable to the dangers of the urban street. I wondered what Andy's mother would do, if she could, to protect her son from the violence, from the beef, that had already claimed Andy's cousin and that sometimes seemed to draw Andy in. As the semester came to an end, I feared Andy would disappear into a statistic. Like Augustus, Andy seemed to want to attend college to prepare for a career. Yet, Augustus, like Andy, saw more compelling allure in another kind of life:

> 'My mom's friends [who have legal jobs], I respect them, but they don't know about life,' [Augustus] said . . . 'My thugs, they know about life, because they were in the struggle, too.' His friends had seen darkness in the world, Augustus said, just as he had. Some had gotten shot. Some had been arrested. They knew what was up. 'That type of people,' he said, 'they got big dreams.' (Barry)

Like Augustus and his friends, it is clear that Andy approached college studies with dreams that he feared might be too costly and too unrealistic. Though Andy's writing suggests an intelligent, thoughtful person who is clearly capable of college-level thinking and composing, he lacked Carl's comfort with assimilating the discourses of college and the business world.

Andy also lacked Carl's handsome scholarship and guaranteed job in Finance while in school. Andy could not ease into the dominant bootstrap narrative that Carl had embraced, even though he was certainly intelligent enough to do so.

In such a cultural conflict, can the writing class serve as mediator? Can the writing class itself use its syllabus, lesson plans, activities, and learning process to address the kind of crisis Andy presented? As Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner wrote in their discussion of students who, like Andy, distrust "the system" and express job market anxiety, "we need to find ways to mobilize such ambivalence as a critical resource" (120). In the rest of this chapter, then, I will consider how Andy's story–including his background, experience, and cultural knowledges–informs disciplinary questions of curriculum and pedagogy in Composition. For example, how might a teacher mobilize Andy's extant literacy and his vocational fears as sources of knowledge-making? As another critical scholar and teacher, Carmen Kynard, wrote, "I am not interested in vesting students' literacy and language practices with . . . canonical authority." Rather, Kynard is interested in "examining the political dynamics that deny it" (33). The community discourses Andy participated in (hip-hop, street survival, making money, dress and speech codes, etc.) had no legitimate presence in the liberal arts curriculum. Andy rarely elaborated his anxieties and fears in a larger context of racism or class inequity.

Despite the fact that his explanations of his condition were less rich than his descriptions of them, I also saw Andy's anxiety, and his particular path into and out of the college door, as a potential source of deep knowledge of how life is lived and felt by some young, aspiring people of color in some urban settings. For example, though Andy did not articulate it in such academic terms, at times he surmised that the most important kind of

capital is *social*. "Whenever I ask people how they got their jobs, they always say, 'my friend hooked me up,'" he explained. "So it's not what you know; it's who you know." From this perspective, hip-hop discourse (a form of cultural capital) enabled useful social capital (because knowing hip-hop and using it identified him as a young man who fit the local model). This clash of discourses–academic knowledge presented by the Liberal Arts and experiential knowledge presented by hip-hop–helped shape Andy's anxiety. This is an example of the complex and conflicted relationship to both non-academic and academic culture that many non-elite students bring to college, a relationship that might profitably become the syllabus of a college writing course.

This question of how to draw from students' social context in curriculum design is part of lengthy debate in Composition Studies about which topics for reading and writing are appropriate for writing courses. This debate erupted into two landmark confrontations in the field. Perhaps most notably, in 1992, esteemed senior scholar Maxine Hairston touched off a furious debate over subject matter by accusing some "radical" compositionists of inappropriately forcing on students highly-charged political topics by using "writing courses as vehicles for social reform" (180). Hairston argued that the source of these ideological excesses lay in the fact that most writing programs are housed in English and Literature departments where "graduate students are already steeped in post-structuralism and deconstruction theory . . . and in feminist theory" and "haven't been well-trained in how to teach writing" (185). Following Hairston's opinion piece, the major journal in the field, *College Composition and Communication* received and published the largest number of rejoinders in its history (*CCC* 44.2) in a debate that did not end the much-discussed "social turn" of Composition in the 1980s which Hairston found intolerable.

Shortly after, Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate published companion articles in *College English* addressing the question of whether literary texts are an appropriate subject matter for writing courses. Lindemann argued that literature should *not* be taught in Composition because "literature-based courses . . . focus on consuming texts, not producing them" (313). Lindemann proposed that literary texts are meant to be appreciated and are not appropriate models for student writers who must "create texts like those they read." (314). Tate responded by arguing that there is more to writing classes than simply preparing students to be more effective academic writers or preparing them to succeed in their future careers. He wrote that he has no interest in helping students enter academic conversations through the transmission of academic discourse. Rather, Tate hoped to prepare them for "conversations outside the academy, as they struggle to figure out how to live their lives . . . how to vote and love and survive, how to respond to change and diversity and death and oppression and freedom" (320). Tate embraced the intrinsic power of literature to improve lives because, he asserted, it conveys the beauty and adaptability of the human spirit, an Arnoldian suggestion about the morally transcendent effects of some kinds of texts.

Discussions about classroom politics and pro/con arguments about literature in writing courses prompted scholars like Sharon Crowley to argue that such assertions miss the point about the social function of First-Year Composition. Crowley claimed that discussions of appropriate subject matter in Composition need a robust critique of what she called "the discourse of student need" ("Composition's Ethic" 233). The dominant discourse on student need, to Crowley, constructs students as deficits generously assisted in learning what they need to succeed by well-meaning teachers in benevolent institutions. This prevailing discourse of student need, as it is argued by Lindemann, for example, proposes that the

universal requirement of First-Year Composition is in the students' best interest because it will prepare them for future courses and their professional lives, or as Tate counter-argued from another dominant discourse on textuality, that literature, through its aesthetic form and moral themes, will by itself help students become better human beings who live improved lives. "The discourse of needs," Crowley wrote, "positions composition teachers as servants of student need that is spoken, not by students, but by people speaking from powerful institutions" (233). In composition courses, which have functioned since the 1890's as gatekeepers to higher education through which all students must pass, the question of which subject matter is appropriate takes on greater urgency. Writing courses, unlike those in academic disciplines like Sociology or History or Biology, do not have an inherent subject matter; instead, they are construed as linguistic skills-development venues.

Composition-Rhetoric scholar David Russell took issue with this focus on skill-based pedagogy. To him, writing courses have historically been expected to teach students how to use an abstract, formal idiom of speech and writing which he called "Universal Educated Discourse (UED)," a mythical code, he claimed, because in reality no such singular discourse is shared across disciplines or by "all educated (or truly educated) persons" (60). Discourses vary across fields depending on the literate practices and canons in each community of scholars. Therefore, Russell critiqued composition models that assume a unitary teachable discourse (whether Hairston's Standard Written English, Lindeman's rhetorical methods, or Tate's literary texts). Russell argued that all discourses function in specific "activity systems," actual contexts of communication, which is a gloss on Vygotskian social theory of language use. From this point of view, then, composition courses cannot teach "general writing skills" because human beings do not write or speak *in general* but rather in specific, meaningful

contexts which guide their literate practices. Consequently, according to Russell, writing teachers can only effectively teach meta-linguistic awareness, that is, studying how language is used by actual people in real situations to get certain things done. Russell and other scholars (see Carter) argued that students actually develop literacy skills by participating in discipline-specific, meaning-centered contexts as apprentices where they practice the disciplinary discourses ("activity systems") that constitute professional communities. If discourse habits or skills, then, cannot be taught or learned generally but must be studied by addressing real issues, purposes, and audiences, then writing instruction must be contextualized, opening the syllabus in a number of directions, one of which is the powerful actuality of student speech and experience.

This theory of discourse as dependent on the concrete activity system it serves is relevant, then, to what subject matter is appropriate for a composition class. If UED is a mythical construction that inappropriately represents academic discourse as generic and singular, then writing courses teaching it are mis-educating students in what Russell termed "General Writing Skills Instruction," or in what Elizabeth Wardle called "mutt genres" that "do not respond to rhetorical situations requiring communication in order to accomplish a purpose that is meaningful to the author" (777). If reading, speaking, thinking, and writing are not autonomous, abstract skills but are rather context-specific social practices, then the writing classes that make the most sense are those that begin with a specific subject matter recognizable to students and relevant to their interests. In fact, though the practice is not widespread, using themes familiar to students has been attractive to many composition teachers. As Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington argued, writing classes should

"provide more and better opportunities for students (and teachers) to engage *their* worlds" (103).

"Their worlds," then, become the places where contextual, accessible, and compelling subject matters or "activities" are discovered. What would it mean, in thinking through curriculum, for a student like Andy to read and write critically about topics grounded in *his* world? What are the institutional possibilities and limits of such a practice? Critical pedagogues in the tradition of Paulo Freire might argue that Andy's fears and cultural awareness, far from being a distraction from his studies, are valuable repertoires of generative themes. Other scholars (hooks *Teaching*; Shor *When*; Le Court; Thelin) have taken up the Freirian idea that teachers should dialogue with students to discover themes and subject matters that become the syllabus for a critical reading and writing course. In Andy's case, for example, it is clear that he is *already* theorizing his world from a particular discourse that he is also eager to discuss and even to teach.

How can a writing class move Andy's theorizing of his own conditions into deeper social-and-self-reflection? One critical educator, Peter Roberts, in "Rethinking Conscientisation," argued that such reflection, what Paulo Freire called "critical consciousness," is not a state of being. Rather, it is a *social* activity like reading and writing. In a writing course in which the subject matter comes from students' daily lives, the goal is for unreflected (or partially reflected) experiences to become reflected understandings so that what is lived implicitly or intuitively becomes grasped explicitly and analytically. In such a critical writing class, students and teachers work to develop explanations of their own daily realities and circumstances. In other words, Roberts defined the controversial notion of "consciousness-raising" as *not* the teacher imposing her/his supposedly superior views on

students, but rather encouraging students to examine their world from alternate points of view "provided dialogue is employed in place of monologue and in so far as the starting point for any program is the *lived reality of learners*" (italics mine 183). Concerning how lived experience becomes reflected knowledge, Freire himself discussed the concrete tasks for teachers in a dialogic classroom: "The educator's role is to propose problems about the codified existential situation in order to help learners arrive at a more critical view of their reality" ("Adult Literacy" 490). In other words, developing a writing curriculum that takes Andy's material conditions (including his fears and anxieties) as starting points does not mean trying to make him into a different person with alien values and ideals. Critical pedagogy, as I describe it here, has nothing in common with the mythical version critiqued by some in the field. For example, Richard Fulkerson wrote that critical pedagogy (or what he termed "critical cultural studies") may "indoctrinate" students because "[t]eachers dedicated to exposing the social injustice of racism, classism and homophobia cannot perforce accept student viewpoints that deny such views" (665). Such an assessment perpetuates the false notion that critical teachers view students as uncritical and limited in their capacity to understand their own circumstances from alternative points of view or to draw on those circumstances to propose themes for a reading and writing course. Instead, critical pedagogues acknowledge that students have competencies for critical knowledge about their conditions which traditional education fails to develop. This is true of Andy, I argue, because he already participated in a rich, urban, non-academic discourse on his situation. A student-centered, critical pedagogy does not "expose injustice" to students, as Fulkerson asserted. Rather, critical pedagogues re-present students' experiences, discourses, and perceptions back to them as questions to be explored. Such a curriculum would address

Andy *not* as an uncritical thinker who must advance in stages toward a more sophisticated view of the world, but rather as an agent of his own fate, that is, as a competent "subject who both shapes reality and is shaped by it," as Roberts wrote (193).

In practice, what would such a pedagogy look like? How might Andy's relationship to hip-hop, for example, be re-presented back to him as a subject of inquiry? In "There Goes the Neighborhood," Kermit E. Campbell argued that, in addition to representing the world to urban youth like Andy, hip-hop, "this inner-city, youth-driven artistic and cultural movement," also represents black, urban life to white, suburban youth who are the major market or audience for hip hop, buying 72% of rap and hip hop albums (328). If Andy sees hip-hop as a reflection of his experience, a problem-posing pedagogy might present the data on audience so as to complicate his articulation of this phenomenon; why is it that record companies make enormous profits marketing such depictions of black, urban youth to young, white, suburban consumers? Such problem-posing might expand Andy's discourse connecting music and his social world, especially his interest in the relationship between class, race, and power.

Critical pedagogy, then, becomes one site for Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," insofar as the classroom activity system (problem-posing about generative themes) is an occasion for analysis of under-theorized experience. In this regard, it's fair to include my tutoring of Andy, as well as my multiple conversations with him for this research, as other zones of proximal development which had a critical impact on his thinking. For example, during one of our last conversations before he disappeared from campus, Andy told me he had been pondering my questions on "beef" (doubtless, a good candidate for a generative theme). Our dialogue had apparently prompted him to do some additional thinking

about the term and the many ways it was used in his community. While Andy still insisted that "beef" was primarily about young men in urban neighborhoods gaining respect and asserting dominance over peers, he asked me to listen to yet another song on his ipod. He told me that Jim Jones' definition of "beef" was not the only one in circulation and that there were multiple ways one could define the term. "Some people say," he explained, "that real beef is war." With that, I listened to hip-hop artist Mos Def's song "What's Beef?":

> Beef is not what Jay said to Nas/ . . . Beef is the cocaine and AIDS epidemic/ Beef don't come with a radio edit/ Beef is when the judge is callin' you 'defendant'/ . . . Beef is what George Bush would do in a fight/ . . . Beef is oil prices and geopolitics/Beef is Iraq/ the West Bank, and Gaza Strip/ Some Beef is big and some beef is small/ But what y'all call Beef is not beef at all.

This different discourse on "beef," which Andy extracted from his own reflections on hip-hop, presented competing theories between Jones and Mos Def. Developmentally, this is one example of Andy acting as a knowing subject who rethinks words in his world, that is, the way his experience can be represented in language. For Jones, beef defines a certain form of gendered violence in urban neighborhoods when black men of limited means win respect by acting tough, as well as when rappers confront each other in mainstream hip-hop music. However, Mos Def understands that beef is not only practiced in these circles, but also by elites at the top of the social and economic hierarchy. Mos Def takes the idea of beef and extends it, in other words, into a larger political frame to define the inequality, injustice, and racism that are perpetuated by the powerful.

This incident of Andy reconsidering the meaning of the term beef is important because it is one of the few times in my work with him that he expressed awareness of the

historical forces that shaped his own and his friends' practices and perspectives. Most of the time, Andy, like Carl at commencement, described success and failure as products of individual will and merit. Foucault would describe the dominance of such bootstrap discourses as "regimes of truth" that circulate through the social body, manifesting themselves in the smallest, everyday perspectives and activities: "[I]n thinking of the mechanisms of power," Foucault wrote,

> I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. (*Power* 39)

Foucault argued that power is powerful only when it circulates through the everyday activities of individuals whose choices embody the effects of power relations, whose bodies carry and realize power-effects. Like Carl, in this study, Andy insisted that people are responsible for themselves and that what happens to them is largely of their own making. This is not to say that Andy could not have imagined himself in better circumstances. As Richard Miller wrote in "The Arts of Complicity": "it is a mistake to think that subordinates have been so thoroughly colonized that they cannot conceive of or desire a better world. It is more accurate to say that they have no access to the channels of social power that might bring this better world into being" (17). There is little evidence that Andy met critical discourses on campus, at home, or in the workplace to counter dominant narratives such as the bootstraps story. His self-directed complication of the generative word 'beef' demonstrated his openness to another way of seeing in his world. Just as importantly, this

revealing indicator of Andy's potential and emerging understanding was not measured by a timed, impromptu essay exam or by a short-answer test.

IV

I do not underestimate the difficulties of designing a critical writing course on themes based in non-elite students' knowledge and experience, especially if some, like Andy, harbor doubts about the promise of education. As Henry Giroux wrote, "critical pedagogy should be deeply concerned with matters of specificity and context, and it should demand a certain ability to listen, witness, make connections and to be open to others and the conditions that give meaning to their lives" (48). Being open to others is a key goal that can be facilitated by the selection of subject matter for the writing classroom that is based in students' interests and knowledges. To do otherwise, we may, at best, risk perpetuating false notions that people can learn to write "in general" about subjects they know little about and have no stake in and, at worst, we may be recreating, what Susan Miller called almost twenty years ago, a "course in silence" that does not provide students with a forum to voice their own views or to demonstrate, refine, and re-imagine their own thinking (127). Perhaps a focus on composition's subject matter is also a way to find common ground with some critics of critical pedagogy who argue that educators and institutions must take students' vocational goals more seriously (Durst). As James Ray Watkins Jr. wrote in his text on English Studies and social class mobility, "students' ambitions for financial stability (if not prosperity) are as legitimate as our own desire to promote life-long learning" (123). Taking students' goals seriously, however, does not mean abandoning our own commitment to the liberal arts. The question is what does life-long learning look like and what are its contents? Andy attended

college with students from diverse backgrounds and experiences, even though the student body was typically urban, working-class people of color. Despite these commonalities, students at LIU are, of course, not one-dimensional in cultural orientations just as they do not all listen to the same music. Yet, scholars have shown that students do respond positively to a pedagogy that establishes some mutual exchange between teachers and students (Gorzelsky). Though not a singular recipe for subject matter in a critical writing course, Andy's story illustrates how non-elite students' material conditions and cultural awareness can be both obstacles to academic progress at the same time that they are enabling sources of agency and competence.

Of course, affirming students' knowledge, fears, and concerns as generative subjects for a writing curriculum is only a provisional first step in actually putting such a program into practice. While I consider what Andy taught me about his own anxiety and about beef as important in helping me see possibilities for critical practice, I also acknowledge the institutional and professional limitations of such an effort. The first of these is, obviously, time. It took many hours of one-on-one interviews with Andy to gather this data from a student who was always open and willing to share his thoughts and fears with me. Such student-centered themes must then be usefully deployed in a semester-long time frame. As T.R. Johnson, Joe Letter, and Judith Kemerait Livingston wrote in their essay on composition after hurricane Katrina, curricula and pedagogy must be in "constant contact with time, with the swirling riptide of the present moment" (45). Ethnography, then, is a research method useful for generating subject matters for the syllabus. However, since most composition courses are fifteen weeks and writing classes at LIU can have as many as twenty-two students, I completed my interviews with Andy feeling that the possibilities for a genuine

critical practice–one that spends a great deal of time researching students–is limited by a lack of resources and willing practitioners at most colleges. For untenured or part-time teachers whose labor conditions are often quite prohibitive, researching Freirean "generative themes" for writing classrooms may be difficult at best, especially when curricular material for writing classes is often pre-packaged in required, pricey anthologies filled with literary essays on themes supposedly of interest to students. Still, students' material circumstances and competencies may be what John Trimbur called "useful knowledge" that educators can problematize in a critical pedagogy based in local conditions. Just as student-based themes will change in different institutional contexts, the meaning of the term "critical pedagogy" will change and evolve in different places and times. But the crux of the definition, as Trimbur wrote, "depends in large part on whose questions are taken up" (216). As this chapter has shown, the questions that Andy brought with him to college, his concerns about his place in that world, and his anxiety about his financial future, are already rich subject matters with many generative possibilities for reading, writing, and thinking.

V

As this chapter concludes, I also want to discuss what my narration and analysis of Andy's story suggests about writing critical ethnography. First of all, it is important to note that the rhetorical task of separating narrative material from analytic is a false one. As I will discuss in greater detail in subsequent chapters, narrative is a form of analysis just as analysis often contains elements of narrative. The ethnographic account I offer in this chapter has a specific purpose, that of assessing how students' knowledge, agency, and competencies might become more central to curriculum design across the field of Composition. My strategy in

composing this text was to *first* tell Andy's story, culling material from two years of interviews and conversations to create a partial account of his experiences in and out of school. I hoped Andy's in-school writing and his personal narrative would stand on their own before I discussed their relevance to questions of curricula and pedagogy. In foregrounding student narratives, however, there is also a danger that ethnographers reify the same stereotypes we seek to unravel. For example, in discussing Andy's struggles with urban street violence, with the authority he attributed to hip-hop music, and with the law, I risk confirming racist assumptions that black males are inherently angry, violent, and determined to live outside some mythical idea of "mainstream" culture. Such assumptions sustain an ideology I critique throughout this dissertation: that all non-elite students can stay in school, get an education, and improve their lives if only they have the will and the temperment to, as Andy explained, "get out of the ghetto." In their study of homeless heroin addicts in San Francisco, Bourgois and Schonberg wrote that ethnography, like photography, is "especially vulnerable to ideological projections" such as these:

> [Ethnography] is torn between objectifying and humanizing; exploiting and giving voice; propagandizing and documenting injustice; stigmatizing and revealing; fomenting voyeurism and promoting empathy; stereotyping and analyzing. (15)

Critical ethnographers, of course, cannot always determine how their work will be read and interpreted just as critical teachers cannot always determine how students will respond to reading and writing about subject matters drawn from their experiences. Perhaps one bottom line is that the development of subject matters should be an enterprise that the teacher takes up with input from students. And the risks of stereotyping various groups should also be discussed in explicit terms, both in ethnography and in the classroom. It may be that

articulating the relationship between a broad force like structural inequality and the small, daily interactions of people in institutional settings will always entail some risk of ending up on the wrong side of the narrow border between objectifying and humanizing and between stereotyping and analyzing.

VI Coda

I had finished a draft of this chapter before I saw or heard from Andy again. Eventually, to my relief and surprise, he did come back to LIU where he enrolled again as a full-time student. When Andy came to my office, I admitted that I hadn't really expected to see him (which made me question my own assumptions about the abilities of non-elite students to balance work, school, and social pressures from outside the institution). "Why did you come back?" I asked. Andy gave two reasons for his decision, a decision he said he planned to stick to. He explained that his short time in the prison system had really enlightened him, perhaps even more than he had first admitted: "I was in a big room [at Rikers] with dozens of guys. I heard people crying. I met guys who would kill another person with ease, who have no value for life. That made me think," he said. Seeing up close how desperate and dehumanizing things could become for the most unfortunate had "scared him straight," as the parlance goes. A brief time in a jail filled with men he could imagine himself becoming prompted Andy's return to college. It may also have been that his experience as a student in one kind of institution influenced in advance how he would see the world from inside a prison. From behind bars, the LIU students Andy spoke about condescendingly as "idiots" may not have seemed so deluded. Once released from jail, Andy said he felt that he had little choice but to pursue those limited options he did have to prepare himself for a

career. Even if college debt burdened him for years to come and even if he had trouble finding a well-paying job, a college degree from a non-elite institution was an opportunity he couldn't pass up, he said.

The second reason Andy said he decided to come back to school was perhaps the most important. It was always clear to me from the beginning that Andy deeply loved and had great respect for his parents. In the end, it seems, he largely came back to campus for them. "My parents are co-signers on my student loans," he said. "If I don't graduate, I leave them with a bill for nothing." But it wasn't only because of his parents' substantial financial investment that he decided to stay in college. Andy said, quite simply, that he didn't want to disappoint them. "They want so much for me, a better life than they have," he explained. "They have great expectations and so do I." The importance of Andy's relationship with his parents cannot be overstated. Though he is obviously not the only non-elite student with parents and other family members who love them deeply and make sacrifices, Andy may be unique in the clarity with which he sees their devotion to him and in the purposeful action he takes in response to it. They did it for him and he has to do it for them, an immigrant and working-class story of inter-generational obligation.

Though Andy's relationship with his parents was certainly important, this chapter is *not* about how crucial it is for non-elite students to have caring parents who value education (though it is indeed important). Such a conclusion makes upward mobility merely a question of familial support rather than setting that support in the social circumstances that make it possible. Nor is this chapter merely about a wayward kid who made a few bad choices before he found his way back to the right path. Stirring narratives of error and redemption might be a common genre for Hollywood dramas. In reality, Andy's life, any life, is much too

particular and unique to be reduced to literary sentiment. Rather, at stake in this chapter is the predicament of working-class students in a costly, non-selective college who put up with great economic and social difficulty to graduate so as to capture some edge in a hostile job market, competing against many peers who seek the same advantage. For Andy, the gen ed system of higher education, which at many colleges begins with required basic writing courses, seemed more like an obstacle course on his path to a degree than a doorway to a more prosperous future. Andy may be unique in that he had a great deal of family support and performed fairly well in his classes despite his suspicions about the benefits of higher education. Like other non-elite students who attend college at great cost and great sacrifice, and like the Liberian youth, Augustus, on Staten Island who was stuck between the lure of the street and his mother's hopes, Andy's attempts to improve his situation are far from complete and the ultimate payoff of his education is an uncertain work in progress.

Chapter Four

A Prodigal Daughter: Elizabeth's Second Chance

The Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City is one of the largest outdoor cultural events in the country. In June 2006, more than two million people from the metropolitan region congregated in Manhattan for that year's parade. For a few hours, traffic in one of the busiest areas of the City was rerouted while 80,000 people on foot and aboard hundreds of lavish floats marched up Fifth Avenue. The parade began near Times Square and wended its way to the beat of pulsating Latin music, past Central Park to Museum Mile, a wealthy stretch of Fifth Avenue that boasts world-class museums and haute couture shopping. Broadcast on New York television, the parade's consequence was further confirmed by the attendance of political heavy-weights like New York City Mayor Bloomberg and both U.S. Senators, Schumer and Clinton.

The 2006 network television broadcast cut between the parade and studio shots of Puerto Rican college students from the City who had been awarded $1000 scholarships. One of those featured, 'Elizabeth,' was a middle-aged LIU student and a former basic writer. According to a college official, Elizabeth received the first scholarship of this kind ever awarded at LIU. She did not actually apply for consideration but was nominated by a senior LIU administrator who proposed Elizabeth because of her academic accomplishments. Elizabeth's television appearance, between scenes of exuberant marching bands and interviews with celebrities like Jennifer Lopez, was rather brief and apparently choreographed. An official introduced her as a Puerto Rican scholarship recipient and local success story. Elizabeth, who had returned to college in her late forties, smiled as she held up

a giant check like those displayed on game shows or in commercials for sweepstakes winners. This scholarship was Elizabeth's reward for college success, noted publicly on the same day that she, like tens of thousands of other people across the city, celebrated her Puerto Rican identity.

That day, Elizabeth was one outstanding Puerto Rican face of the bootstraps story. Beyond the mass media package of the award, there is in fact a compelling backstory of Elizabeth's unlikely and difficult rise from basic writing neophyte to LIU honors student, which this chapter will report. After Elizabeth received her check, the network cut back to the parade and then, a few minutes later, to another student from a different college, the next Puerto Rican bootstrapper.

Elizabeth's narrative of upward mobility did not begin, of course, at the Puerto Rican Day Parade and it did not end there either. That TV appearance was a landmark of personal triumph embedded in a complex story of how she did it and who else profited from her advance. Elizabeth's relationship with LIU began two years before the parade when she enrolled in LIU's Sports Science Bachelor's Degree Program, in 2004. She was recruited into the program after stopping by the LIU booth at a college fair that she attended with the youngest of her three children. Her two older children were already in college, by itself a tribute to Elizabeth's promotion of education to her children and her own sacrifices in enabling them to advance ahead of her. Elizabeth applied to LIU and was admitted, but because of low scores on her writing exam, a one-hour high-stakes impromptu, Elizabeth was placed into the basic writing sequence, as were Carl and Andy. Progressing quickly, by the end of her first year at LIU, she applied and was admitted to the Honors Program and even changed her major to English, a remarkable transformation for someone marked as 'deficient'

when she first failed the entry exams. Basic writing students at LIU rarely move directly to Honors. Moreover, as I discussed in "Chapter One," only slightly more than two out of ten students who begin at LIU ever graduate from that institution and basic writers face additional obstacles because they have to take extra courses. Thus, Elizabeth's swift move from basic writing to honors to majoring in English to becoming a top candidate for graduation made her, like Carl, a spectacular exception to the rule.

Also like Carl the valedictorian, Elizabeth attributed her academic progress to the efforts of several hero-teachers who were the most important factors in her success. It is this story that I want to explore in these pages by examining it through the lens of what Sondra Perl called the "shaping power of the tale" ("Composing" 427). Stories are not only vehicles to describe experiences. They help shape and order that experience in certain ways. According to Elizabeth, her teacher-heroes were the devoted mentors without whom she could not have risen from basic writing to Honors to parade exemplar. Despite the shaping power of this tale, this story is as much about what Elizabeth (like Carl in his Commencement address) did *not* mention as it is a story about the terms of her personal triumph against the odds.

II

I first interviewed Elizabeth during the fall semester of her first year in Honors, almost one year before her appearance on television during the parade. Though significantly older than most students, she had boundless energy and enthusiasm. She could frequently be seen walking the halls of LIU pulling a backpack on wheels. Beneath black-gray hair cropped very short, she often wore different pairs of shiny earrings. She came to my office

for our interviews eager to tell me about how her classes were going. What was clear early on was that Elizabeth had an extraordinary work ethic, exemplifying the 'perseverance' theme Carl dwelled on. She was driven by self-organized learning practices. When I would inquire about her classes, for example, Elizabeth opened a binder with color-coded tabs for each course. The syllabus for each class was meticulously annotated, with notes next to each day indicating which assignments she had completed. "I write *everything* down," she explained. "I'm constantly looking at my syllabus. I walk around with my syllabus, and I try to stay *ahead* of what they [professors] want." Such attention to the syllabus is truly an extraordinary marker of intent; in mass higher education, many students do not look at the syllabus after getting it on the first day of class. Elizabeth also carried a lot of material not directly related to her courses that she thought might help her. For example, one day she showed me an extensive list of literary terms that she found on the internet. She told me that when she arrived early for class, she would sit in her car and try to memorize definitions for words like 'pun' and 'soliloquy' in case a teacher happened to use one in class. Doubtless, I was in the presence of a driven individual and an autodidact.

However, despite her drive and successes, Elizabeth doubted her ability to do well in Honors and was disappointed by her 'B' average during her first year. She wanted A's, but something more than hard work was needed to achieve 'A' grades. What she lacked was fluency in the literate practices of the academy. She had a difficult time understanding and responding to academic texts, a cultural wall non-elite students often hit, as Mike Rose described in *Lives on the Boundary*. "I was reading words but not understanding text," Rose wrote of his own college learning curve. "I was the human incarnation of language-recognition computer programs: able to read the meanings of individual words but unable to

generate any meaning out of them" (50). Like Rose, who also grew up working-class, Elizabeth's difficulties with high-status academic discourse provoked self-doubt about what she knew or how smart she was. Similar to other working-class climbers, she desperately wanted to be an 'A' student. Unnerved by how much she needed to learn, one day, she stunned me with the remark, "I realize that I'm illiterate." Elizabeth's comment suggests what Claude M. Steele called the "self-evaluative anxiety" of minorities who fear being judged according to racial and/or gender stereotypes. In Elizabeth's case, she may have feared confirming the stereotype that a middle-aged Latina would not be good at school. Such anxiety is especially powerful in settings where the possibility of failure challenges a student's sense of "belongingness in a domain they care about" ("A Threat" 620). Because Elizabeth, unlike Andy, had come to care deeply about her grades and because she had invested so much of herself in her school success, her academic struggles were even more troubling for her (precisely the performance anxiety Andy was avoiding). After Elizabeth referred to herself as "illiterate," I quickly assured her that she was not illiterate and that there are many different kinds of reading and writing. In fact, she (like Rose) could read and write Standard Written English (SWE) even though the most formal version of SWE, academic discourse, was not yet in her control.

Complicating her first semester in Honors, Elizabeth tried to master high-status SWE while working thirty hours per week at Macy's in midtown Manhattan for $10/hour, then above the minimum wage (about $5.50/hour), but still very little by New York City's cost-of-living standards. At this wage, Elizabeth would not have been able to support herself on her own. Fortunately, Elizabeth did not have to pay LIU's steep tuition. She had received a grant from the Higher Education Opportunity Program, a federally-funded entitlement for "at-risk

students," (a code or "euphemism," as Bourdieu would say, for "working-class students"). Elizabeth also lived with her ex-husband who helped pay some of the family bills. Elizabeth commuted to her job at Macy's via the subway, a trip that took close to an hour each way, precious time away from family and from studying. Thus, Elizabeth's material conditions were grave factors that differentiated her from more privileged college students who live on or near campus and do not have family responsibilities. Perhaps most astonishing is how Elizabeth juggled a nearly full-time job, full-time schooling, and the pressures of her partner's disapproval, which I will discuss later.

As an adult woman returning to college, Elizabeth also admitted to feeling a little lonely at LIU where the average age of freshmen is nineteen and the average age of all undergraduates is twenty-five. In fact, according to university enrollment statistics, only five percent of LIU undergraduates are between forty and forty-nine, Elizabeth's age group. Decades older than most students, Elizabeth longed for companionship on her college journey. These clouds lifted finally, in her second semester in Honors and a few months before the Puerto Rican Day Parade, when she did earn mostly A's. Her mood then brightened. She proudly brought samples of her papers by my office and began to express a deep and abiding appreciation for the college experience. "I love coming to school. I love learning. It's wonderful," she said effusively.

III

As she tells it, Elizabeth credits her professors with clearing a path for her success. By chance, Elizabeth's two basic writing classes were both taught by full-time Composition faculty, not the more likely circumstance of adjunct staffing for BW. Thus, Elizabeth's

extraordinary journey had a serendipitous beginning. Taught by full-time faculty whose terms of employment gave them better conditions for mentoring her in the crucial "drop-out" zone of basic writing, Elizabeth knew how to make the most of her good fortune. Certainly, full-time faculty are not by definition always better teachers and mentors than are part-timers but, as this chapter will show, both of Elizabeth's basic writing instructors were permanent members of the institution whose status afforded them key advantages which they deployed for her benefit: the free time to offer supportive services and to devote particular attention to developing Elizabeth's nascent talents. Higher education's exploitation of contingent faculty has been well-documented (Schell and Lambert Stock; Bousquet). The problem is most serious, however, at community colleges and at non-elite, four-year institutions like LIU where writing courses are largely staffed with low-wage, adjunct instructors hired semester-to-semester with few benefits. These instructors are sometimes hired the week before class begins. Such unprofessional conditions often mean adjunct writing teachers don't have an office or their own phone line, and (as is the case at LIU) are not compensated for the crucial work of one-on-one tutorials outside the classroom.[12] Though Elizabeth cherished the one-on-one time with her full-time teacher-mentors, she was actually unaware of any meaningful distinction between faculty and adjuncts (she referred to all her teachers as "professor," for example, as do many students). As it happened, the BW mentoring turned out to be powerfully developmental for Elizabeth who recorded spectacular progress in those months, in an institution where freshmen often have limited contact with full-time faculty.

[12] The number of part-time teachers employed at LIU varies from semester-to-semester based on enrollment and institutional need. In 2004, for example, the year that Elizabeth enrolled at LIU, there were a total of 64 sections of basic writing and First-Year Composition. Forty-five of these sections, or 76%, were taught by part-time faculty.

Elizabeth reported a particular debt to her first basic writing teacher, Professor 'Howard', who had, she insisted, "turned [her] life around." When I asked Elizabeth to tell me more about how her teachers had influenced her, she described Professor Howard as completely dedicated to her students' education. For example, when Professor Howard assigned Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, a famous journalistic narrative with trenchant social analysis, Elizabeth tried to read it but became frustrated: "It was too difficult for me to read and I kept telling her that I didn't understand." Like Mike Rose, Elizabeth could not make meaning from the words she could read. And, like Rose and Carl, she broke the code of analytic discourse not in group instruction via the classroom but rather through intense individual tutoring by dedicated teachers. Elizabeth says that the professor met individually with her and suggested that she try to read the book again and use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words. Elizabeth reluctantly agreed and found that, on her second attempt, she enjoyed the book. "I was so used to just reading things quick and I didn't know that there's a way of reading," Elizabeth explained. "[Professor Howard] taught me that." Professor Howard's patient, personal tutorial of Elizabeth offered the timely and costly individual attention that can help non-elite students like Elizabeth develop as scholars. The more I came to know Elizabeth, the more I realized she, and other non-elite students, often need close mentoring for confidence-building as well as for cognitive development.

In naming specific things that Professor Howard had done to inspire confidence that she could learn to read, Elizabeth's discourse rose to biblical tropes: "My teachers give me the passion to keep going," she said. "I am like the prodigal son who was allowed to return to school where a whole other world opened up for me." For Elizabeth, good teachers prophetically reveal things and students succeed by hard work because they don't want to

disappoint the teachers they respect. This is an important corollary to her statement that she enjoyed school. For Elizabeth, pleasure in the experience of learning came from measuring up to her teachers' expectations. Here, Elizabeth's narrative echoes some themes from early twentieth century author Anzia Yezierska, an impoverished immigrant from the Polish-Russian borderland who bootstrapped her way from night school to college to a career writing for Hollywood in the silent twenties. For example, the narrator in Yezierska's short story "Soap and Water Are Cheap" is an aspiring, young, immigrant woman on the verge of earning a college diploma to finally become a New York City schoolteacher. But one disapproving dean tells her that she is too dirty and unkempt, too unworthy of a diploma, especially in a city where "soap and water are cheap." Shattered, the student-narrator seeks out a sympathetic and kind teacher, Miss Van Ness. Like Elizabeth's characterization of her teachers, Yezierska depicts Miss Van Ness in sublime reverence: "[She] unbound and freed me and suffused me with light. I felt the joy of one breathing on the mountaintops for the first time . . . Sunrise was all around me" (143). For Yezierska's heroine, and for Elizabeth, a teacher's caring support delivers the neophyte from despair and enables the upward climb to the American Dream.

Elizabeth respected and identified with her professors' judgments so much that she came to construct them as worthy teachers who lack worthy students. For example, during one interview, Elizabeth said that she "felt sorry" for Professor 'Stone', a high-level university administrator, who taught an Honors course in research methods. Elizabeth explained that most students don't know how good they have it: "I just wish students would appreciate [Professor Stone] more, you know, take advantage of all that she gives." Once, in class, Elizabeth even reprimanded a group of her fellow classmates for not paying attention:

"You're acting like children," she said, "don't you know where you are?" When I suggested to Elizabeth that she may feel close to her teachers because she is older than most students and thus her professors are more of a peer group for her, she denied the connection: "[Age] doesn’t matter. It's your drive. It's what you want to do." Elizabeth's drive to succeed is connected to a desire not to disappoint herself or her mentors. In Elizabeth's view, many of her fellow students are too immature and inexperienced to recognize an opportunity when it is in front of them in the form of dedicated teacher-mentors. This apparent incentive to be a good student via exposure to dedicated teachers is not a consistent student experience in schools or colleges, something Elizabeth may have overlooked. Still, she may indeed be right about some undergraduates being unable to value opportunities that come their way. The frequent disregard of younger students for teachers, good or bad, full-time or part-time, may also derive from their being, like Andy, more cynical about what the rigors and costs of a college education ultimately offer. After all, at 18 or 19, traditional-age college students still have years ahead to make something of themselves, to go for a second chance at college, unlike middle-aged Elizabeth who makes the best use of her expensive life lessons and costly second chance. Given these variant material conditions related to age, the younger students may not share Elizabeth's conviction that teachers alone have the power, as Elizabeth said of Professor Howard, "to turn their lives around."

IV

Elizabeth's description of certain professors' efforts on her behalf foregrounds a familiar narrative of Hollywood movies: the hero-teacher whose patience, caring and passion for her subjects changes students' lives (see, for example, *To Sir, With Love*, 1967; *Stand and*

Deliver, 1988; Dead Poets' Society, 1989; *Dangerous Minds*, 1995; *Freedom Writers*, 2007). How might we put Elizabeth's assessment of her teachers' awesome power inside a larger context? Factors like age, gender, and class help illustrate how a local story of one student's success (facilitated by the tutorial attention of teachers) is embedded in a broad social framework that Elizabeth did not articulate in interviews. In order to better understand Elizabeth's experience and her own telling of that experience, it is necessary to extend the analysis further into the social construction of the self. First of all, it is important to note that the narrative of the hero-teacher is not only a narrative standard in Hollywood; it is also a profound reality recorded in some high-profile autobiographies like the one mentioned earlier by Mike Rose. There, Rose famously discussed the intense support and encouragement he received from teachers, especially his high school mentor, who engineered college admission, a scholarship, and then collegiate mentoring for working-class Mike, the son of immigrant parents with little social, economic, or cultural capital to pass on to their son. Like Elizabeth's description of her teachers, Rose also characterized MacFarland's efforts in heroic terms: "[He] had saved me . . . caught my fancy and revitalized my mind–what I felt now was . . . some tentative recognition that an engagement with ideas could foster competence and lead me out into the world" (46-7). Years later, Rose offered the same kind of thoughtful, one-on-one mentoring to the Vietnam veterans he taught in a Los Angeles literacy program. While students just out of high school have youth working for and against them, Elizabeth's age also worked for and against her. Unlike Rose who entered college as a teenager, Elizabeth came to college already well aware that, if she wanted to get an education, she was running out of time. This sense of urgency may have influenced her scholastic seriousness as well as her feelings of being "saved" by some LIU professors. Elizabeth's story of life-

changing teacher-mentors at a non-elite college also positions these educators as 'cross-cultural mediators,' which I discussed in "Chapter Three," who enable some non-elite students to move upward through the cracks. But it is a partial remedy dependent on serendipity rather than a universal one because close mentoring is simply not universally available in school or college to all students (adolescent undergraduates as well as adult students). In addition, all students are not equally available to tutorial interventions offered by some teachers. Thus, Elizabeth's story of the hero-teacher is true and partial at the same time even though her own shaping of the tale presents the case as a universal: worthy teachers lack worthy students and worthy students prosper in the hands of worthy teachers. Her success was enabled by the tutorial investments some teachers made in her development exactly at the moment when she was primed to receive their attentions.

Professors Howard and Stone were not the only teachers guiding Elizabeth's climb. She was initially encouraged to apply to the Honors program by her second-semester basic writing teacher, a veteran faculty member in the English Department. Elizabeth performed so well in Professor 'Martin's' class that she had encouraged Elizabeth to join Honors and even wrote a letter on her behalf to the admissions committee. While Elizabeth put a great deal of effort into her classes, she credits Professor Martin with helping her gain acceptance to Honors where, after her first jittery semester, she became a bona fide Honors student. Elizabeth explained that she began to perform better in her classes in Honors because there are only a few faculty members who regularly teach in the program. From Honors class to Honors class, Elizabeth experienced a consistency of teacherly discourse which spared her the uncomfortable student experience of having to adjust to each new teacher's manners, expectations, and and style of authority. Elizabeth said that the professors she encountered

from class to class during her first *non-Honors* year of college typically wanted something different and, in each new class, she had to figure out what the teacher wanted all over again. Her experience of disparate classroom discourses reiterates Lucille McCarthy's study of students' experiences in undergraduate courses. Following a student she called 'Dave,' McCarthy found that he experienced each class as a totally new rhetorical setting and saw each writing assignment as "unlike anything he had ever done before" (234). For all the apparent similarities among teachers and syllabi, students like Dave and Elizabeth report needing to adapt to different discourse regimes for different teachers. When students have the same teacher in successive courses, the student adjustment is obviously simplified. For Elizabeth, having fewer teachers to please made the process of learning what each teacher wanted more manageable. "I think what made it easier for me," Elizabeth said, "is that I kept the same professors [in Honors]. So I knew what was expected of me and that took some of the weight off." Thus, Elizabeth's success in Honors, a bracketed and privileged space in the curriculum, can partly be explained simply by her membership in Honors because it is a space where the same group of faculty teach and mentor the same group of students. While she felt "illiterate" during her first semester there, Elizabeth soon assimilated teachers' expectations in a close-knit environment not available to most students. Her teachers were indeed heroes to Elizabeth. But their indispensable labors and hers were constructed partly by chance (her luck to be in the classroom of an influential professor) and partly by the hierarchical structure of the institution (enrollment in successive courses with same teachers in Honors classes open only to a handful of selected students). It was indeed rare for an LIU student to be admitted to Honors *after* his or her freshman year.

V

This case study approach documenting Elizabeth's experience at LIU is enriched by going back even further, using older material from Elizabeth's personal history, where other narratives emerge to help explain how she became the kind of student who handsomely rewarded Professor Martin's efforts on her behalf. Elizabeth moved with her family from Puerto Rico to the US as an infant. Her father gained some higher learning, a two-year college degree in Puerto Rico, did a variety of jobs in the US and, for a time, even owned a travel agency. While Elizabeth's father had been to college, her mother had not. Even more consequential is that her mother did not encourage Elizabeth to pursue higher degrees. Instead, she placed a high priority on preparing her daughter to assume traditional female domestic roles as submissive wife and mother. Elizabeth's descriptions of her mother are similar to bell hooks' assessment of her own mother's belief that daughters had to be trained "to be the kind of girls men would want to marry—quiet, obedient, good homemakers" (*Where* 20). Though her family was poor, hooks reported in her autobiography that social class issues were never discussed in their home even as her parents were often consumed by money worries. In addition, hooks' mother constantly warned her daughters to beware of sex because of unwanted pregnancy, dangers that would bring shame and more money woes on the family. Elizabeth describes learning similar lessons from her mother: "I was taught that . . . my mission in life as a girl," Elizabeth wrote in an essay for an Honors Philosophy class, "was to keep my virginity intact so that I could be considered valuable and worthy of a wonderful man." Of course, such gendered warnings circulate in many homes with daughters, but they have special status among the poor, whose teenage girls are at greatest risk for rape, pregnancy, early childbirth and sexually-transmitted diseases (Luker). Such

motherly warnings worked in hooks' case and they had an impact on Elizabeth, who did not bear a child until twenty-one.

In addition to early lessons about chastity, Elizabeth was also taught that education was only valuable because it made her a better wife and mother: "I was to do well in school because I need to help educate my children and not embarrass my husband," she explained. Perhaps as an act of rebellion against her mother's rules, Elizabeth says she was a "teacher's worst nightmare" in high school where she barely managed to pass. She went on to marry a man her parents did not approve of, the father of her first child. As a result of Elizabeth's choices, her father, who had previously encouraged her to enroll in college, rescinded his offer to help pay tuition. He declared to her, "that [baby] is your college degree. I'm not helping you." Elizabeth said that, in those years, she accepted her father's belief that women "can't go to college and be married at the same time." She then changed her ambitions and resolved to be the best wife and mother possible.

Her father was not the last person who would tell Elizabeth that she had to choose between one kind of womanhood and another. Her decision to enroll at LIU in her forties prompted an intense and ongoing personal conflict with her second husband, a man she refers to with a chuckle as "my ex-husband-boyfriend." 'Victor', a supervisor at the New York Environmental Protection Agency, earned a solid middle-class income without a college degree, a job-market outcome that complicates the dominant pro-schooling discourse circulating at Commencement, metaphorically called "the education gospel" by sociologists Grubb and Lazerson (*The Education*). Elizabeth and Victor had two children together in a relationship she described as very "traditional." During their marriage, before returning to school, Elizabeth had been primarily a wife and mother, always "doing things for other

people." In response to this assessment of her previous experiences, I suggested that perhaps she found college so inspiring because she could focus on her own goals and dreams for the first time. "Yes! It's about me now!" she agreed. Though Elizabeth's teenage rebelliousness may have been partly a reaction to her parents' rules, her adult college attendance seemed like a different kind of defiance, the kind that emerged from years of inhabiting a traditional female role in her home. After raising her children and entering middle age, her desire to explore her options was more pronounced and her anger at those who stood in her way was more acute. Though Elizabeth did not describe her anger and her ambition as *a feminist awakening*, which is the frame I would choose, she did act tacitly as an emerging feminist without articulating it in such terms.

Elizabeth described Victor as one obstacle to her college success. According to her, she and Victor had divorced some years before after he left the family to, Elizabeth explained sarcastically, "find himself" (perhaps a male code for "sleeping around"). A few years later, after their children were nearly grown, he returned and Elizabeth grudgingly allowed him back into her family partly because her material conditions were poor and she needed him to help make payments on the house they had once shared. Victor may have helped with the rent, but, as Elizabeth reported, he did not want her to go to college. He said that her studying would take away from the time she should spend cleaning the house and making meals. Elizabeth creatively dramatized one of her arguments with Victor in an autobiographical piece she wrote for an Honors writing course. The assignment asked students in the class to write a dialogue on the theme of "a conflict between lovers." In Elizabeth's story, a husband confronts a wife about her decision to pursue a college degree:

He: I don't want you to go to school. I want you to leave it. Bills need to get paid and the kids and I need you.

She: I am not leaving school for you or anyone. The kids are grown. They don't really need me. What the hell has gotten into you?

He: If you continue going to school, you have to get the fuck out of my house.

She: Oh, I see. Now it's your house. Well, get this buddy boy. If I have to sleep on the mother fucking train, wash up in the fucking school bathroom and study in the damn library, I will do it! As for this house, shove it up your ass!

The rage and determination here speak for themselves. Elizabeth explained that writing this personal story in Honors helped her deal with the anger she felt towards Victor. This piece of writing, then, may have also been part of Elizabeth's emerging "literate identity, the improvisational weaving together of experiences that lies at the center of our person" (Roozen 566). Because it was centered on her own experiences, this personal narrative sparked a great deal of reflection in Elizabeth; it accomplished what narrative writing can do in student-centered classrooms–enable students to articulate feelings, thoughts, and intentions that make explicit what is tacit. Furthermore, her ex-husband's refusal to accept her desire to pursue higher education seems only to have confirmed Elizabeth's resolve to complete her degree.

In addition to claiming autonomy from her ex-husband, there was still another personal reason that prompted Elizabeth's return to school. Elizabeth said she always looked up to educated people and wanted her children to be like them, to go to college. As I explained earlier, her two oldest had already begun college before Elizabeth enrolled at LIU. One price she paid for this goal is that Elizabeth found herself "growing distant" from her

children after they left home and assimilated collegiate discourse and habits. In describing why she came back to school, she said, "I don't want my children to be ashamed of me." Then she smiled and explained that she wanted her children to be proud of her: "I want my kids to be able to say 'my mother goes to college.'" Elizabeth's troubled relationship with Victor as well as her concerns that she was growing distant from her college-attending children further illuminates the gendered conditions shaping her personal experience. For example, Victor did not need a college degree to win respect or power in the family. Patriarchy–and his steady paycheck–had already granted that position to him. As a wife and mother, Elizabeth struggled against pervasive feelings that her children would be ashamed of her. She felt that she was required to earn the kind of authority that Victor could take for granted. During our interviews and conversations, it is important to reiterate, Elizabeth never articulated her personal history in such gendered terms. As I look back now, I realize I missed many opportunities to encourage her to perceive the feminist context of her troubles at home. As a novice researcher, as I will discuss further in "Chapter Six," I was debating how much of my own views to reveal in my work with subjects. In addition, I was (and am) still learning about how gender and patriarchy shape the tales we tell about ourselves.

Elizabeth's shaping tale of redemption through higher education is complicated by the fact that she sought the approval of her hero-teachers *and* the pride of her children at the same time that her ex-husband accused her of neglecting her children in favor of her studies. The teacher-hero narrative may have become a prominent thread in her story of academic success because it offered an uncomplicated framework for the conflicting, painful history Elizabeth brought with her to the institution. Professors Martin, Howard and Stone were the

kind of educated women she admired and who admired her, neutralizing some of the criticism of the disapproving male authority in her life, her ex-husband.

The life story that Elizabeth told of initially embracing, then ultimately rejecting, traditional femininity invite a reading of her as an "emerging" feminist. Yet, while explicit regard for feminism never appeared in her utterances, another ideology did, Christianity. Elizabeth drew on this familiar ideology for the iconography of 'the prodigal son' and 'the savior' (the teacher-hero). As part of a generation born in the early 1960's at the dawn of the women's and civil rights movements, Elizabeth, as an immigrant woman, was perhaps in a contradictory place in time, pressured to occupy a potent traditional role at the same time that more women were asserting their autonomy to pursue higher education and careers while delaying, or foregoing, marriage and motherhood.

Educational researcher Carla O'Connor has written about the importance of "time-specific models of collective political action" for women's academic resilience in the face of constraints ("Black" 897). As a young girl, Elizabeth's mother had encouraged her to do well in school so she wouldn't embarrass *her husband*, but not to take her education too far *for herself*. Now, at LIU, Elizabeth said she wanted to exceed her mother's modest expectations by attending college so as not to shame *her children*. In O'Connor's terms, Elizabeth may have benefited from the feminism of the 1960's forty years later when she was able to finally draw on these "historically situated resources" to achieve her own goals and to insist on some personal satisfaction for herself (897). Importantly, though, Elizabeth's strategy for pursuing her own goals was an individual one. In interviews, she never described her efforts in a feminist context. When asked to name the reasons for her success, Elizabeth downplayed her fraught personal history and articulated the teacher-hero narrative. Despite having to navigate

a complex, gendered landscape of family responsibilities and class expectations, Elizabeth still insisted that individual merit (Carl's theme) and the help of selfless teachers were the real explanations for her success.

VI

Elizabeth's teacher-hero narrative, enriched by her complex back-story, contrasts with the simplistic representations of success offered at commencement and by the TV broadcasts celebrating scholarships on Puerto Rican day. Dominant narratives circulate in everyday times and places as well as in moments of grand spectacle. Special events and daily activities both contribute to the formation of human subjects. They signal who we are and what kind of society we live in. Once dominant narratives (like the bootstraps story) consolidate in time and place, they become preponderant discursive forces in subject formation, though certainly not the only ones. Circulated by spectacular rituals like parades and television (or, in Carl's case, Commencement) dominant narratives are difficult to displace with counter-narratives, though they are always being tested by counter-hegemonic pressures of one kind or another. In some ways, the pervasive circulation of dominant discourses reiterates Foucault's assertion that peace is actually the "continuation of war by other means" (*Society* 15). That is, dominant forces deploy structures to maintain their dominance, including the structure of discourses that produce exemplars like Carl and Elizabeth who confirm the bootstraps/fairness narrative. In part, then, the story Elizabeth told about her own transformation from wife, mother, and basic writer to Honors student and scholarship recipient fits Carl's Commencement narrative of hard work paying off with success, proof that access to the American Dream depends on individual effort. Though Carl stressed

willpower in his commencement address while Elizabeth stressed the novice cooperating with the guiding hand of hero-teachers, their stories show the truly deserving being rewarded. Carl's and Elizabeth's accomplishments are, of course, real because Carl and Elizabeth worked hard, followed the rules, and deserved their success. But they are also imagined because both Elizabeth and Carl presented their successes as equally available to all.

An alternative, critical discourse would question how basic writers are socially produced and institutionally identified (by the unequal childhoods and adulthoods structured by social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and other factors). Specifically, in Elizabeth's case at LIU, we might ask about the differential learning experiences available in regular versus Honors classes. Pedagogically, in classroom activities, teachers might pose unequal outcomes as research problems to students, as an invitation or orientation to "read the world as they read the word," as Paulo Freire put it (*Literacy*). Once students have been given an opportunity to write about and discuss the problem of college success or failure, the instructor could mine students' texts for themes that can be proposed back to the class as questions for further consideration. For example, neither Elizabeth nor Carl questioned the institution's authority in determining who is a basic writer; nor did they question how an unequal society distributes more resources of all kinds to affluent groups. If critical ethnographies like this one can reveal such discursive aporia, how can critical pedagogy use these contents as subject matter?

A critical discourse that offered Elizabeth an alternative for the story she told about herself would put her local history in a global context, that is, invite her to develop what C. Wright Mills called 'the sociological imagination', where self-understanding and social understanding intersect. In 1959, Mills wrote that the sociological imagination allows an

individual "to understand his own experiences and gauge his own fate only by locating himself with his period, that he can know his own chances in life by becoming aware of those individuals in his circumstances" (5). Critical teacher-mentors, then, might encourage students to develop a "sociological imagination" linking their personal histories to larger social structures like racism, class inequality, and sexism. In addition, qualitative studies like this one can help cultivate a researcher's sociological imagination, the ability to use case study data to define institutional rhetorics like "bootstrapping individualism" even if research participants would not so critique their experiences. Indeed, Mills proposed "sociological imagination" as a key habit of mind for citizens in a democracy.

VII

My role as researcher also requires questioning how Elizabeth chose to tell her story. Because I asked the questions, and because I was always intensely interested in what she had to say, it is possible that Elizabeth came to thrive on the attention from someone like me who she considered a "professor." Though half a generation younger than Elizabeth, I am half a generation older than most undergraduates she met in class. In some ways, I may have become the more mature friend that helped assuage some of the loneliness she felt in college. As an adult woman, Elizabeth knew that when she came to me, I would listen closely and sympathetically to the stories she had to tell. Though it is difficult to assess the extent of such an influence, our friendly relationship and the fact that I was an administrator at LIU may have increased her willingness to credit her professors–and the institution–with her success. That is, Elizabeth's singular emphasis on how valuable teacher-mentors have been to her could be one way she positively managed my self-esteem on her behalf in this encounter.

Even so, this does not make Elizabeth simplistically 'wrong' in her assessment of what led to her success. One potential for the less powerful in social relations is inventing means to gain some traction in asymmetrical conditions (according to James C. Scott's notions of oppositional "infrapolitics" and "the hidden transcript" and Michel de Certeau's theory of "bricolage" or 'making-do'*)*. Notions of human agency in unequal power relations complicate viewing Elizabeth's statements as merely part of a dominant narrative of hero-teachers aiding worthy students. Such a formation would make Elizabeth a prisoner of her own story. But Elizabeth is no prisoner. She is an agent making choices, pursuing the limited options available to her and the pleasures therein. Her vigorous studies at school might also be a strategy of resistance to the opposition at home from her male partner and a way for her to defend herself against the loneliness she felt as a non-traditional college student. When no consolidated public means of resistance are available and when no class-based groups or social movements are campaigning locally for democracy and equality, Elizabeth and her peers have little choice but to pursue private maneuvers and individual strategies, an instance of de Certeau's "bricolage" or what Carla O'Connor called "covert and nonconfrontational strategies" for academic access and success ("Black" 897).

Such strategies add nuance to any reading of Elizabeth's rise from basic writer to Puerto Rican Parade exemplar. During one of our last interviews, for example, Elizabeth challenged some of my own assumptions about the way hero-teacher and exemplar-student narratives function to obscure power relations by showing me how different the story I was telling about her was from the one she would tell about herself. During her fourth year of college, Elizabeth attended a poetry reading featuring a new member of the LIU Master of Fine Arts faculty. A few days after the reading, Elizabeth came floating into my office to tell

me how wonderful it was. "I got so high!" she said as she described the patient, respectful way a room full of people listened as the poet read her work. Afterward, there was a wine and cheese reception so the attendees could mingle and talk about what they had heard. "Everyone had such a nice time just talking about reading and writing," Elizabeth said. I reminded her that she had expressed a lot of self-doubt and frustration during her first year of college and that she had once said she felt "illiterate." "You've gone through such a big transformation," I said. "How did this happen?" It was a question I had put to her in an earlier interview when she credited hero-teachers with her success. Elizabeth paused for a moment to think. She had trouble speaking because she was trying to hold back tears. The following is a transcript of our conversation:

Ann: Sorry! I didn't mean to upset you.

Elizabeth: No, it's okay.

Ann: Do you want me to turn the recorder off?

Elizabeth: No, I'm not upset. It's just that I'm so happy.

Ann: I'm happy for you!

Elizabeth: I can't even explain the joy of reading things and understanding them. No one can say what you say is wrong. Your inner self comes out.

As an interviewer who had asked Elizabeth the same question before, I was thrown off guard by her emotional reaction. Elizabeth's expression of happiness prompted what Cate Watson called "interviewer shock" in which "the interviewer is surprised, confused, and moved into a state of disequilibrium" in the face of an interviewee's unexpected response (108). I had not

anticipated such feelings of intense joy from the same student who had, not long ago, admitted to feeling illiterate and lonely as a new college student. Elizabeth's emotional response to the poetry reading, then, caused me to question my own reading of her experience as part of a familiar narrative of hero-teachers enabling success for hardworking, worthy students regardless of institutional policies or students' material circumstances.

Elizabeth's story–from Puerto Rican immigrant to Honors student–is partly about the joys of being a winner, and partly about the power of dominant discourses to shape experience and perception. Though Elizabeth's expression of joy at "reading things and understanding them" reflects a personal exhilaration at breaking the code, it confirms as well the liberal arts narrative about the transformative power of education. Still, it is a dramatic part of her experience at LIU that I had not anticipated. Her joy is the Burowayan anomaly in my analysis of her journey from basic writing to Honors. Elizabeth took great pleasure in the cultural and social capital she had accumulated in college and saw it as her individual reward for a job well done. As an adult, non-traditional student, she recognized how far she had come and how hard she had to work to get where she had found herself: in a room where wine is sipped and poetry is read to avid listeners for whom art is a source of marvel and belonging. Elizabeth had assimilated such rituals associated with an intellectual elite that she yearned to join. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said wrote that there is a subjective core to all human experience. Though human lives are "accessible to analysis and interpretation, . . . [they are] not exhausted by totalizing theories, not marked and limited by doctrinal or national lines, not confined once and for all to analytical constructs" (31). In other words, as the writer of a dissertation that critiques dominant narratives, I am also shaping a tale of Elizabeth's life in school, foregrounding events and situations that make up a fraction of the

whole. I did not anticipate the deep wonder and satisfaction that Elizabeth derived from her college experience because, in my own theorizing of the relationship between dominant narratives and the construction of identity, I never thought to ask her about it (perhaps because I could barely remember having experienced such wonder myself). Theory, in that sense, is a kind of narrativizing. " . . . [T]he production of a theory," Said wrote, "is rooted in historical and social circumstances, sometimes great *crises*, and therefore, to understand theory, it's not important to see it as a kind of abstract thing but rather to see it as something that emerges from an existential *need*" (266). In Elizabeth's own parlance, joy is what the prodigal son feels at his return; it is what happens when one *doesn't* disappoint or shame. In other words, local positionings and, in Said's terms, "existential needs," powerfully shape the narratives we rely on to explain our experiences.

In my own thinking about her progress, I returned to Elizabeth receiving her award during the Puerto Rican Parade. It was an iconic moment for a student whose hard work had paid off in a shockingly short period of time. I had also noticed that, along with a number of other students, Elizabeth's image was being featured in an ad campaign displayed on city subways and in newspapers, including the *New York Daily News*. One day, I opened the paper to find Elizabeth smiling up at me. She was standing with other students under the headline: "LIU: We're With You Every Step Of The Way." During one interview, I congratulated Elizabeth again and she said that her Parade appearance had been a real highlight for her.

Ann: You deserve it.

Elizabeth: [The parade] was a trip. I have my check at home. This big giant check! I had already planned what I was going to say [on TV] and the thing is, they didn't want us to say anything. [An LIU official] just read something off the monitor.

Ann: I was hoping you'd get to say something. . . . What would you have said had you been allowed?

Elizabeth: I wrote it down somewhere . . . But it was basically like I was addressing all the women, telling them that it's never too late to come back to school.

The fact that Elizabeth and the other scholarship winners were not allowed to speak on TV suggests the event was being narrated for them. Though Elizabeth was not allowed to say what she wanted, she hoped her success would serve as an inspiration to other women like her, a sign that she had embraced her exemplar status from a feminist angle. Elizabeth's expression of happiness may be partly fueled by her sense that the promise of higher education as a path to upward mobility and intense cultural rewards is truly available to all women if only they could be convinced by a voice on television that "it's never too late." Yet, what happened to Elizabeth is not a paradigm for the educational progress of students in general or of women of color in particular. Unlike Elizabeth, bell hooks describes her freshman year of college as a sad and often lonely experience. In *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, hooks wrote of her sense of isolation as a painful initiation into the racism and classism she would experience in higher education for the rest of her life. As one of few black students at a women's college and the only black woman in her dorm, hooks wrote: "my fellow students kept their distance from me. . . . I kept my desires to myself, my lacks

and my loneliness" (25). When hooks transferred to elite Stanford, her feelings of shame and loneliness only deepened:

> Now and then a committed college professor opened my mind to the reality that the classroom could be a place of passion and possibility, but, in general, at the various colleges I attended it was the place where the social order was kept in place . . . Slowly I began to understand fully that there was no place in academe for folks from working-class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind. (36)

hooks, the critical student who became a critical scholar, held school and society to a higher standard of social justice than does Elizabeth, the aspiring undergraduate. hooks, who already possessed alternative discourses and ideologies while still in college, set herself outside the ritual spectacles confirming the status quo: "At no time in my years as a student did I march in a graduation ceremony…I was not proud to hold degrees from institutions where I had been constantly scorned and shamed" (37). hooks, a scholarship student, felt scorned and shamed; Elizabeth, a scholarship winner, felt mentored and honored. Elizabeth couldn't wait for her children to attend her own graduation: "that will be a great day," she said. Unlike hooks, Elizabeth had no criticism of the institution; it was simply the place where her personal success was fostered and where other students could do the same if they would only work hard. 'Working hard,' of course, was Carl's theme at Commencement. In the next chapter, I will take up the story of 'Michelle' whose hard work and perseverance in college raises crucial questions about whether or not an expensive, non-elite degree is a good investment for the majority of working-class students who seek it.

Chapter Five

'Fists As Well As Hands': Lateral Mobility in a Non-Selective College

The year before Carl gave his valedictory speech at Commencement and the year that Elizabeth made her appearance on television during the Puerto Rican Day Parade, twenty-six year old 'Michelle,' another former basic writer, attended her own graduation to collect a bachelor's degree. Unlike Carl (who majored in Business, a popular choice at LIU as it had become throughout US higher education in the 1990's), Michelle majored in Psychology and minored in Gender Studies, two relatively unpopular disciplines at LIU. Not surprisingly, most job-focused LIU students choose more career-oriented fields like Business, Accounting, and Health Sciences (Nursing, Pharmacy, Occupational and Physical Therapy). But Michelle did not gravitate towards these heavily-enrolled courses. Since immigrating at eleven from Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the world, Michelle had decided to become a social worker or school counselor with a particular interest in helping other immigrant women like her.

The day Michelle donned her cap and gown was the culmination of a long journey from non-English speaking immigrant childhood to college graduate in New York City. This journey, of course, reiterates the bootstraps narrative emphasized a year later at Commencement by both Carl and CEO Parsons. She could serve, then, as an exemplar of perseverance because Michelle earned her diploma by beating tremendous odds, refusing to give up when she had many chances to do so. At her Commencement, she, her family, and her teachers had good reason to celebrate her tenacity.

On close examination, though, some questions about the actual payoff, or labor market "distinction," of non-elite college degrees complicate the bootstraps narrative of her success (Bourdieu). First, Michelle's choice of major is gendered, preparing her for a low-wage 'caring' profession, social work, that is dominated by women and for which non-selective campuses like LIU are a regular pipeline. Carl, by comparison, was entering a path to Wall Street finance, a career venue dominated by men from higher-status campuses. Like Carl and Elizabeth, Michelle put a great deal of effort into college. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine *any* LIU student graduating without the willpower to succeed, given the obstacles of class and race. But, in Michelle's case, her gender, her second-language status, and her non-native birth made her six-year journey to a degree even more exceptional. She needed the coveted diploma to open doors for her in the job market. Her difficulties finding work in her field after graduation compels attention to 'the education gospel,' the ideology that hard work and striving to better oneself through higher learning will result in improved material conditions (Grubb and Lazerson). Many working-class students like Michelle have an urgent need for their hard-won degrees to lead immediately to good-paying jobs so that they can pay off debts as soon as possible. Failure to do so is not a mere inconvenience, but a personal and family crisis. How are we to evaluate mass higher education when successful completion of a degree cannot bring closure to disadvantage?

To explore Michelle's tenure at LIU and her circumstances after graduation, I will first review my early relationship with her including my role as her writing center tutor, a position that allowed me to partly facilitate and observe her academic progress. My work with Michelle also enabled me to learn about her life outside the institution as a Haitian immigrant with a troubled past that contributed to her academic struggles in college.

II

I met Michelle in 2000 while I was an LIU graduate student pursuing an MA in English. Michelle, a second-semester freshman, was one of the first students I tutored at the campus writing center. In Haiti, Michelle spoke Creole in her community but, because she had attended a colonial school where French was the language of instruction, she also spoke some standard French. She did not learn any dialect of English until she came to the US and enrolled in a New York City public school at eleven. Upon arriving at LIU eight years later at nineteen, she was fluent in spoken English vernacular with some non-standard pronunciation features, and was weak in Standard Written English (SWE). Since Michelle's life story provides important context for my analysis of her development as a writer, I will quote from an autobiography she wrote as an LIU student. It is important to note that this text had to be heavily-edited for SWE by an outside editor for it to be acceptable to her instructor because she could not meet that teacher's expectations for correct usage. Some in the field, including Peter Elbow, advise writing teachers to require SWE correctness *only* on the student's final draft with students allowed to write until the final copy in whatever usage they bring to the course. Unable to achieve SWE on her own in her basic writing class, Michelle sought out an informal editor, as Elbow in fact has recommended in his essay "Inviting the Mother Tongue." Michelle's SWE editor was an English-proficient friend from outside the institution. She went outside perhaps because writing center tutors at LIU were trained not to simply edit for errors but to emphasize revision strategies. Michelle begins her *Autobiography* by describing what life was like in Port Au Prince for her family:

> I have three sisters and one stepbrother. All of us were born in Haiti. I was living with my father, my stepmother, my three sisters and my brother who was deaf and

> mentally disturbed. We used to live in a one-bedroom house. My father used to work as a construction worker while my stepmother stayed home to cook and clean. My sister and I would spend half the school year at home because my father wouldn't pay for it. I think it was because he had other wives to take care of. My mother was living in the United States.

In effect, describing informal patriarchal polygamy, Michelle goes on to describe the physical abuse she and her two sisters suffered at the hands of their father and brother. She also describes a constant state of fear that their house would be robbed by the mobs of thieves that roamed the city. When Michelle's father and stepmother were away one night, it was their turn. Burglars broke in and stole everything they owned except for the beds they slept on. Michelle and her siblings were too scared to stay in the house: "we stood outside from nine in the morning to seven at night with no food all day. It was like that for two weeks with no food and we wore dirty clothes." Michelle was unsure where her father was although it was not uncommon for him to be gone from home for days at a time. After another burglary where nothing was stolen because there was nothing left to steal, Michelle's mother in the States finally sent for her and her siblings to come to New York City where she had rented a small apartment. Michelle explained that it is common for members of families, including mothers, to find work abroad and to endure long separations from their children before earning enough money to reunite their families in a new country. After arriving in the US, Michelle, her mother, and two of her sisters lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Harlem. Michelle eventually graduated from public school. Since she had to take some ESL classes to improve her English, Michelle spent an extra year in high school. After graduation,

she was admitted to LIU and enrolled in the two-course basic writing sequence. Soon after, she registered at the writing center where I was assigned to work with her.

As a new graduate student and tutor, I was not always sure how to support students like Michelle who had come from backgrounds so drastically different from my own. I had also not been given much formal training in tutoring native speakers of English or ESL students. Such inadequate attention to training tutors for the needs of students is a negative material condition which Paulo Freire called a "limit situation" because it is a socially structured limit on learning (*Pedagogy* 80). LIU did offer sheltered basic writing and composition classes for non-native speakers, but Michelle was judged fluent enough in English based on her impromptu placement test so she enrolled in a "regular" basic writing course for native speakers, a level she had trouble negotiating. As she pieced her way through these institutional discourses and bureaucratic stations, I tutored her mostly using my own intuition and cheerful good intentions. Because it was clear that Michelle's immigrant background and history of schooling were important in her development, I determined to find out as much as I could to be of help.

One intuitive strategy I employed was to position myself as a more experienced, older sister who could counsel Michelle on how to succeed in college writing classes. Fortunately, this persona helped her become comfortable with me as her tutor as it established a good rapport. During our first few sessions, I asked Michelle questions about her life and her previous experiences reading and writing. As a new student, she didn't know many people on campus so she seemed glad to engage in these conversations. Because I was, like her, a young woman new to LIU, she may have felt even more willing to open up to me about her struggles and aspirations as she worked to write well enough to pass her required writing

courses. Though I had not been a graduate student at LIU long, my undergraduate experiences gave me a working foundation to offer concrete suggestions and general advice to a new college student.

Looking back, I realize that I easily assumed a "big sister" role because I thought of teaching/tutoring as a caring relationship, even a maternal one. It was clear that Michelle was limited in her knowledge about higher education and she needed whatever coaching and advocacy I could muster (through which I informally constructed myself as a 'cross-cultural mediator,' as I discussed earlier). The fact that my own mother is a teacher may have also influenced my maternal attitude towards teacher-student relationships. My perspective may have been further informed by the general perception that a writing teacher/tutor is a "dedicated mother–characterized by her sacrifice, deep investment, and care for students" (Enoch 292). There are, then, ample explanations for the mentor-advocate role I adopted in helping Michelle.

When it came to specific writing instruction, my strategies as a new tutor were also often based on dominant assumptions about how people learn. Like many English graduate students, tutors, and writing teachers, I had not studied Composition and Rhetoric before being hired to work as a writing tutor and, later, a Composition teacher at LIU; in fact, before entering an MA program, I did not know that such a field existed. Partly because of this lack of training, I imagined that I could more or less seamlessly transfer whatever I knew about writing once I could account for what had "caused" Michelle's literacy problems in the first place. I also worked hard to be friendly and encouraging, assuming that, for students like her, it was lack of ease and lack of confidence in writing that were the primary roadblocks to learning college-level discourse. At that point in my own development, it was hard for me to

imagine that obstacles to college success could be located anywhere but inside students' own psychological and cognitive processes.

In addition to wanting to help her because she indeed needed help, I tried to get to know Michelle because I found her writing problems so perplexing. As a new tutor, I had not seen much student writing, let alone writing filled with so many usage errors. My startling discovery of college students bereft of college discourse repeated Mina Shaughnessy's famous description of the shock that City College faculty experienced when they encountered open admissions students in the early 1970s. Thirty years after, I primarily saw myself as, what Donna Strickland called, a "diagnostician." I assumed my job was to see what was "wrong" with Michelle's writing and help her "fix" it ("Errors"). The following is an example of the SWE errors Michelle brought with her to LIU. This piece was written as an informal response to a class reading in a required research-writing course taken during Michelle's *third* semester of college. The assignment asked Michelle to read a class text on gender roles in contemporary society and write a summary and an analytical response. While this example displays some of Michelle's writing problems, it is also evidence of how she then wrote about issues of gender and patriarchy, subjects she would return to later in her academic career.

> In our society men play certain role and women play a role as well. Our morals from what we learn from society and when it comes to make a decision about a situation we do it base on the moral tradition that was install on us from childhood this moral tradition may come from religious believe, or morals can be culturally related. the idea of morals, become an issue when the behavior is display for society to respond. However, the same woman have to be more careful about she does, and the kind of decisions she makes. When it comes too moral it's like we are

walking on egg shells. If a woman step out of line and do something that society thinks is unacceptable, she can be call all kind of name.

Michelle argues that women are unfairly punished when they "step out of line." She also locates this unfairness in a "moral tradition" that is culturally determined, or "install on us from childhood." This sample is evidence of Michelle's initial critical thought on the subject of gender and patriarchy. As Mike Rose wrote, "writing filled with grammatical errors does not preclude engagement with sophisticated intellectual material, and errors can be dealt with effectively as one works with such material" ("Colleges Need" A76). Michelle's prose in this text is also an example of the literacy obstacles she faced to pass her college classes. She had to revise this short, informal piece several times for it to be acceptable to her instructor who wanted Michelle to turn in an error-free paper. From my point-of-view as her tutor who had participated in bi-monthly, hour-long training sessions at the writing center, I learned that good writing is more than correct writing, but incorrectness of this degree was unacceptable to Michelle's teacher, who had sent her to the writing center to get help with correct grammar and usage.[13] I dutifully guided Michelle through the process of correcting errors and revising unclear sentences in her essay. By the end of the semester and after many other writing assignments and a string of revisions, Michelle earned a 'B' in the class. We were both delighted. It was the highest grade she earned that semester.

Though I worked with Michelle for two years, her early success was not always reproduced in other courses. Her transcript reads like an obstacle course of attempts, near

[13] There is a great deal of research on how writing centers, a low-status and underfunded entity in many institutions, are pressured to serve as "fix-it" shops or proofreading clinics for student writers from all sectors of the college. For examples, see Stephen North and Nancy Grimm.

misses, and minor successes. During her twelve semesters at LIU, she failed, took an incomplete, or withdrew from a total of eleven courses, all of which she had to retake for credit. Michelle's grades in the classes she did pass were not high. She completed eleven courses with only a 'D' and earned 'C's in a total of fifteen courses. Financial problems also inhibited Michelle's progress. She took two semesters off between her sophomore and junior years to earn money to pay tuition that her loans would not cover, a "stopping-out" rather than "dropping-out" phenomenon noted in regard to working-class students (Lavin). It would have been impossible for Michelle to graduate in four or even five years and her grades reflected her ongoing struggles to meet basic academic requirements. When she finally completed all required courses for her Psychology degree in 2005, her cumulative GPA was just under 2.0.

Year by year, Michelle's saga involved patiently accumulating literacy in SWE and accumulating enough money through loans and work to pay for college and for living costs. At the end of six years, she left with a low-status degree attached to a low GPA. Michelle's graduation does reflect Carl's theme of persistence because of her own dogged determination and her refusal, against all odds, to give up. One enormous advantage Carl brought to college that Michelle lacked was his English-language background (which he did not reflect on at graduation). One enormous advantage Michelle had compared to some other female students is that Michelle did not have her own children or sibling child-care responsibilities while in college (which meant she had more time and disposable income to devote to her studies). Like Carl, Michelle might be understood as a contemporary Horatio Alger figure whose "bootstraps" narrative confirms individual will in a nation of higher education opportunity. In fact, in some ways, Michelle's journey is even more remarkable than Carl's because he was

male, born in the US, and reported sharing a good relationship at home with his mother and sibling. Michelle, on the other hand, immigrated just before adolescence and reported many family problems that inhibited her academic progress. She also had to learn a new language and make up for years of poor, part-time schooling in Haiti before she completed high school in New York. Michelle also relied on loans to pay her tuition while Carl had a coveted full-tuition scholarship. Despite these obstacles, Michelle became a college graduate in the richest city in the world, a world capital of finance and culture, no less. The image of her hands stretching up to something just out of reach could have been used on the billboard across the street from campus.

III

Though, at the time of her graduation, Michelle still struggled with fluency in SWE, she had made progress as a reader-writer who had come to enjoy reading. Her eagerness to profit from her emerging literacy can be seen in an incident from high school, when a teacher gave her a book by a Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Michelle loved the book about a young girl living in Haiti with her aunt until her mother summons her to New York City. Michelle, then in high school, had never read a whole book before and told me that she was thrilled to find one that interested her so much. As might be expected, in her college years, Michelle's most meaningful reading experiences came from texts that were deeply embedded in her life and culture, connecting "text to context" and "reading the word" while "reading the world," as Paulo Freire proposed (Shor and Freire 135-138). *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was compelling to Michelle because it spoke of familiar places, people, and experiences. This potential for textuality to illuminate actuality was clearly a landmark in

Michelle's literacy narrative. Choosing reading matter that is legible and accessible to basic writers certainly makes sense to develop their literate skills even though basic writers can read texts at some remove from their immediate contexts. Michelle's reading of Danticat was an important *initiation* into the potential power of text because it helped her learn that a book could reflect her own story back to her *and* teach her things she didn't know about her own origins. "Since reading books by other Haitians," Michelle said, "I have learned more about my country than I ever could have known by living there." This is an extraordinary statement about texts as mediations for awareness; reading functions here as far more than a mere skill-developing activity. For Michelle, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was appealing first because it was about a Haitian girl and second because it introduced her to a text that could explain her own experience in important ways. In other words, by reading (and enjoying) a book so deeply reflective of her habitus, Michelle glimpsed the potentials of a critical literacy that embeds life in texts and texts in life.

Michelle's memorable reading experience confirms discourses in the field of Composition since Mina Shaughnessy about the potentials of oft-maligned basic writers. Composition and Basic Writing scholars have long argued that nontraditional students can and do learn college literacy. Such arguments about the potentials of non-elite students are foundational to the field's identity, and not only in Shaughnessy's work. In the inaugural 1975 issue of *The Journal of Basic Writing*, for example, Sarah D'Eloia grounded her argument that basic writers should learn to compose in SWE by insisting that nontraditional students are capable of doing so and that their hopes for jobs and upward mobility rest on mastering the standard dialect in speech and in writing, a dialect that instructors, in turn, were obliged to teach. "In spite of the real difficulties of acquiring fluency in the standard written dialect,"

D'Eloia wrote, "we believe there are legitimate reasons to believe that many of our students can succeed" (12). Under siege by academic traditionalists who dismissed basic writers as unworthy of college, and by innovators who called for "students' rights to their own language" (SRTOL),[14] D'Eloia and her embattled colleague Shaughnessy at City College merged advocacy for basic writers with advocacy of standard usage instruction. In this scheme, writing instructors had the task of direct instruction in standard usage so as to pass students on to the regular composition classes as the next station in their progress towards upward mobility. D'Eloia's argument was aimed at the SRTOL advocates who campaigned for a writing pedagogy that incorporated black students' dialect in the classroom. At that early moment in Open Admissions and basic writing contentions, the field itself was just beginning to address the special needs of ESL writers like Michelle.

When Mina Shaughnessy developed the first basic writing program at City College in the early 1970's, she asserted a foundational belief in the potentials of basic writers, whom she represented as capable learners arriving on campus from grossly inadequate public schools: "[S]uch was the quality of their instruction that no one saw the *intelligence of their mistakes* or thought to harness that intelligence in the service of learning" (italics mine 11). Shaughnessy was also the first of many compositionists to argue that basic writers' prose problems are not evidence of their inability to think logically. In her view, teachers should not confuse surface errors with lack of intelligence. Since Shaughnessy and D'Eloia, other scholars (Rose "Remedial"; Fox; Bizzell) have made similar arguments about the latent

[14] In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication passed "Students' Rights to Their Own Language," a resolution from the field's professional organization that continues to inspire discussion and controversy. For historical background on the resolution and discussions of its current implications, see Parks and Smitherman and Villanueva.

abilities of basic writers. Deborah Mutnick, Director of the Writing Program at LIU, in a widely-read volume about the value of basic writing as a college access point for non-traditional students, wrote that

> the majority [of basic writers] will not produce rhetorically sophisticated, error-free, academic writing by the time they graduate, let alone in fourteen weeks. To exclude them from higher education on the basis of weak writing skills is to sever ties to a generation who can benefit from more schooling in a number of ways, make substantial progress as readers and writers, and contribute their own knowledge and experience to universities. (188)

As I suggested above in this regard, Michelle's writing about gender and patriarchy, while full of surface errors, suggests an engaged, intelligent person behind the words. It also suggests that, as Mutnick argued, Michelle benefited from schooling and made progress as a reader and writer.

Perhaps the epitome of advocacy for basic writers' potentials is Marilyn Sternglass's *Time to Know Them*. Sternglass was another teacher and scholar in the City College English Department, the historical epicenter of battles over Open Admissions and basic writing in the 1970's. Her text was a well-researched, six-year case study of several basic writers on that campus in the 1990's. Carefully detailing the material conditions which affected learning in such a non-elite setting, Sternglass depicted students who are much like those at LIU: low-income, first-generation enrollees who hold down jobs while caring for children and taking classes. Sternglass's longitudinal research gave scholarly depth to the earlier advocacy for such students by poet Adrienne Rich, also a writing teacher at City College in the 1970s, whose essay "Teaching Language in Open Admissions" became a much read paean to the

struggles of students who do homework on the subway while commuting between classes, jobs, and family. Sternglass identified the many ways social and economic inequality affected students' academic progress. For example, her students would run out of money for school (as did Michelle at LIU, though Carl did not) forcing them to "stop out" and save up, resulting in long completion times to their degrees. Sternglass gave an explicit, data-based profile to economic and class issues, whereas Shaughnessy, twenty years earlier, understood these material conditions implicitly and anecdotally. Sternglass argued that obstacles to academic achievement are far more numerous and complex than a lack of fluency in SWE, as D'Eloia had singularly (mis)emphasized. Sternglass asserted that non-elite students need intense, continuous institutional support if they are to succeed. She found that if institutions provided students with extra tutoring and additional time to get the work done, basic writers could learn the reading and writing skills to graduate despite the enormous economic and social disadvantages they faced. Sternglass also echoed Elbow and Patricia Bizzell who argued that students' problems with Standard English fluency or the conventions of academic discourse should not disqualify them to perform at the college level. "In an urban academic setting," Sternglass wrote, "students should not have their academic progress stifled by the appearance of language features . . . they do not yet control automatically" (161). For Sternglass and others, then, it is unlikely and unfair to require students with non-standard dialects to master in a semester or two the SWE which is, in essence, cultural capital passed on to mainstream (middle class, white) speakers by their families of origin. It is clear that for Michelle, who struggled with composing in SWE throughout her college career, such a requirement could never have been met.

Sternglass's research was a well-informed defense of *basic writers* but not a defense of the *basic writing programs* in which they were enrolled. She concluded that most students in her study were "penalized by their placement and retention in basic level classes" and "did not need specific remedial work" (298). Her assessment echoed findings from a 1981 study of open admissions at CUNY, *Right vs. Privilege*, by Lavin, Alba, and Silberstein. That earlier research showed that in CUNY's senior colleges "exposure to remediation did almost nothing to facilitate academic achievement. Nor did remediation improve GPAs in subsequent courses" (252). In fact, the authors of that six-year study confirmed that one of the most important factors in determining how open admissions students fared was whether or not they could pass remedial courses in the first year. Students who did not perform well in basic writing, the authors wrote, faced "a gloomy fate" (252)[15]. In other words, though *access* to college for non-elite students was an important egalitarian feature of CUNY's Open Admissions, access alone could not by itself overcome the inequities that had structured each student's development prior to enrollment. Instead of remedial courses, then, Sternglass proposed "mainstreaming" basic writers into First-Year Composition. In her judgment, the fairest and most promising curriculum meant offering to all students a one-year "regular" composition course that "integrate[s] reading and writing with a single instructor" for the entire year (298). She did not argue that there is no role for "basic" instruction, but that additional support services should be offered to students who need or request it outside the

[15] These findings were confirmed in a 2009 study of more than 24,000 students enrolled in remedial courses in a Virginia community college system ("Promoting").

classroom setting.[16] In effect, Sternglass asserted that it is unfair and ineffective to segregate students via high-stakes entry and exit tests, a position that implies high-stakes testing and skill-driven basic writing are obstructions to student progress, (Freire's "limit situations" once again).

Sternglass's study is important because it examined how students' social and financial realities, rather than their mere linguistic or academic performances, impede their academic progress. Yet, she did suggest academic solutions to the social and financial obstacles students face including mainstreaming basic writers and providing them with adequate support services. She thereby proposed an enhanced relationship between institutions and students in which non-selective colleges, *with proper support programs in place*, can facilitate the academic success of the lion's share of non-elite enrollees. D'Eloia argued that we should enhance the job-market prospects of basic writers by transferring SWE to them in the BW course; Sternglass argued for mainstreaming basic writers into regular composition classes rather than segregating them in sub-collegiate tracks. Once mainstreamed, Sternglass argued, such non-elite students would need intense tutorial services like the kind Carl and Mike Rose received from their teacher-mentors. Doubtless, Sternglass's intelligent mainstreaming proposal addresses the material conditions of non-elite students. Her proposal leads me into further discussion of the material conditions that enable or disable student progress towards a degree.

Michelle has much in common with the students in Sternglass's study in terms of her impoverished background, her poor prior academic preparation, and her trouble composing

[16] Other basic writing scholars have also advocated that institutions provide extra writing support outside the Composition classroom in a "writing studio" setting. See Grego and Thompson and Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson.

SWE. Michelle also has an added obstacle of being a second-language learner of English. In Sternglass's terms, Michelle was able to (finally) graduate because she took extra time to complete her degree and was able to get long-term, intensive tutoring. While Sternglass's proposals were aimed at institutional changes to enhance the graduation rate of *all* students, such a goal must confront an already-embedded institutional narrative that places the burden for success on the students' shoulders. This singular focus on what students must do for success shares a friendly fit with the bootstrapping narratives delivered by valedictorian Carl and CEO Parsons: non-elite students succeed on their own merits, talents, and willpower. Attention to inequality in the institution and in society are what Foucault called "disqualified discourses" ignored by both Commencement speakers (*Society* 15). Dominant education discourses which disqualify or displace material conditions, thus put personal responsibility alone at the center of what matters, a dramatic focus on individualism which Bourdieu called a "cult of the self," and which Carl, Parsons, and Elizabeth articulated as an ideology of 'the system works only if the student works hard enough' (*Distinction* 415).

In this ideology, individual access to non-selective mass higher education marks the system as fair, but the student is not authorized in such narratives to expect or demand any more from the status quo than low-level access. To legitimize this singular focus on student responsibilities, the *institution* celebrates successful, hardworking exemplars like Carl and Elizabeth and singular successes like CEO Parsons whose backstories imply that any who fail have only themselves to blame for their lack of perseverance. Such a dominant discourse is certainly an obstacle to the institutional changes Sternglass advocated. For example, while Michelle's eventual graduation might be read as an indicator of the upward mobility a non-elite college can offer students like her, it is also part of a narrative that elides a high non-

completion rate for most other students. The simple reality is that most students at non-elite colleges like LIU will not complete degrees. Such statistics taint the process as a whole regardless of the powerful and poignant stories of successful exemplars. In addition, while Michelle did make academic progress, this chapter will show that she was, at the same time, also being written into a powerful social script that partially determined the possibilities and limits of her success. As Michelle's writing tutor, I began to perceive such possibilities and limitations after she described a deep experience with another text situated close to her own life which the next section will discuss.

IV

During her second year in college, one semester after we began working together, Michelle enrolled in First-Year Composition where she was assigned to read "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker's famous essay. Michelle's encounter with this text was another landmark in her thinking and writing about gender issues. She became interested in writing about relationships between mothers and daughters after reading Walker's essay. Michelle was struck by a poem that Walker included in the essay where she described her own mother as a brilliant "artist" who spent her whole life working for other people and taking care of children: "They were women then/my mama's generation/Husky of voice–Stout of/Step/With fists as well as/Hands . . .". Walker's essay, like Danticat's novel mentioned earlier, was a text situated close to Michelle's own subjectivity as a black woman who, I soon discovered, had a troubled relationship with her own mother.

As I discussed previously, the connection Michelle made with this text suggests the importance of subject matter and texts speaking closely to students' own contexts. Designing

such a student-centered syllabus requires the teacher and the writing program to study the students' concerns and experiences for themes for the writing classroom, as I discussed in "Chapter Three." Curriculum design in such a student-centered approach, then, is a professional activity based in knowing students, in dialoguing with them to learn about their backgrounds, and in testing what issues and problems matter most to them. The practice of studying students so as to situate lesson plans in their culture and conditions is a labor-intensive activity, more time-consuming than traditional writing courses based on a generic reader or a skills-based grammar workbook. Further, such a student-centered curriculum is also difficult to establish when writing courses are staffed by underpaid, overworked adjuncts with varying levels of investment and preparation. Given the common reliance on unevenly trained, poorly-paid adjunct staff that turns over often, writing program and writing center administrators are under pressure to get control of sprawling enterprises by mandating readers, handbooks, anthologies, workbooks, rubrics, etc.

As Michelle's assigned tutor in a large writing center, my once-per-week hour with her did not include designing a whole writing curriculum. Rather, my job was to help her pass her writing classes. Since I was a graduate student just learning about Composition pedagogy myself, I was certainly not in a position to change any of the course structures under which Michelle learned to read and write college-level discourse. Still, as I described before, my intuited strategy to learn as much as I could about her facilitated a comfortable, friendly relationship between us. As we discussed Walker's essay during one of our tutorials, Michelle told me about an incident a few years before that still plagued her. She may have chosen to tell me about the experience because of the one-on-one setting of the writing center and the "big sister" role I had assumed. When Michelle was sixteen, she was living with her

mother and siblings in Harlem. She told me that she had started to dislike–and mostly ignore–her mother's insistence that she follow a curfew and limit the time she spent socializing with friends. Resenting her mother for leaving her and her siblings in Haiti while she came to the US to find work, Michelle figured she had been left on her own enough not to have to follow her mother's rules now that the family was reunited.

As a teenager, Michelle also chafed against what she considered her mother's old-fashioned morality. Their relationship became even more volatile after her mother forbade her from dating a boy she liked: "I just got so angry at her," Michelle explained. "Who was she to tell me to stop seeing him?" One day, after another verbal fight about her boyfriend, Michelle was fuming in her room while her mother cooked in the kitchen. Michelle came out intending to leave the apartment to meet some friends. She saw that her mother had fallen asleep on the sofa. In the kitchen, there was a pot of water boiling on the stove. Michelle turned the burner to high and walked out.

By the time Michelle returned home, the apartment had caught fire and her mother was trapped inside. Firefighters were finally able to rescue her, but the apartment had been rendered uninhabitable from fire and smoke. Michelle's mother was in the hospital for three weeks recovering from burns and smoke inhalation. Luckily, no one else in the building was hurt. Michelle visited her mother in the hospital and was overwhelmed by guilt. No one in her family knew what had really happened. This incident was a secret burden Michelle carried into early adulthood and college.

Michelle explained to me that Walker's essay helped her re-perceive her relationship with her mother and her awful guilt. She began to understand how a generational and cultural divide had contributed to her anger towards her mother and to her actions on the day of the

fire. She figured it was also difficult for her mother to watch her young and vulnerable daughter adapt more easily and quickly to life in the US than she had. Michelle realized her mother had made many sacrifices for the family's well-being. "In the end, I can't really blame her for wanting to protect me," she said. As I listened to Michelle's story, I realized that Walker's essay, a text, had done more to evoke this student's critical reflection on experience than I could have done on my own as her tutor. In effect, Walker's essay may have "released [her] into language," as Adrienne Rich put it, by giving voice to her own history as a young, Haitian woman in New York (12). It may also have been that the text helped Michelle, as a more mature 20-year old, reflect back on the experience in a way unavailable to her as an angry 16-year old. Michelle's reflection on Walker's essay is not only another example of the critical reading and writing that a text closely-related to students' lives can evoke. It also illustrates the stresses embedded in the material conditions of this immigrant family. Standing as she did on her mother's tired shoulders, Michelle was able to leap into college where LIU was in many ways an enriching experience. Through reading and writing, she began to see her own circumstances differently and to connect her life story to other women's stories. Yet, as this chapter will show, the stubborn material conditions of a poor immigrant stuck to her even after graduating. These conditions were manifest in her difficulty finding a job, her financial debts, and in her fears of an uncertain future.

Before Michelle graduated, but after she completed her required writing courses, she continued to visit me periodically in the writing center. Despite what I had learned about Michelle's progress as a reader who was most interested in texts that deeply engaged themes from her own life, I was also a little uncomfortable by her admission of her role in the fire. I was only Michelle's once-per-week writing tutor. I unexpectedly learned of her committing a

juvenile crime that could have killed her mother and others in the building. I felt a weight of responsibility which may accompany "sisterly" tutoring of this sort. Writing this chapter is part of my attempt to understand the relationship between the institutional setting in which Michelle made her admission and the painful personal story she needed to unload to me. Not long after reading Walker's essay, Michelle decided to major in Psychology and minor in Gender Studies. Her decision, one might say, gave vocational shape to the powerful intersection of autobiography and academic texts.

In retrospect, I also can observe what Michelle missed in the story of how Walker's essay helped her come to terms with the fire. She did not, for example, reflect on the race and class dimensions of her own family's conflicts. Though Michelle surmised that their fights were partially caused by her mother's fear of inner-city youth culture, Michelle did not acknowledge that her mother may have been aware of the risks Michelle faced as a young girl in a big city. Since Michelle was in a vulnerable position because of her gender, age, class, and race, her mother may have felt obligated to restrict her movements, as do many other parents of such daughters (just as Elizabeth's family of origin tried to restrict her when she was young). In this regard, Walker's essay *does* particularly discuss the impact of slavery and patriarchy on black women, but Michelle *did not* mention how race and class contributed to the volatility in her own apartment.

The fact that I did not prompt Michelle to explore these critical social issues points to my own limits as a novice teacher/tutor with middle-class roots. At that moment in my tutoring relationship with Michelle, I did not know how to articulate such social questions about race and class. My own long-term schooling from K-12 to graduate school had left me mostly unequipped to perceive and to articulate such questioning discourses about the status

quo. Nor could I see then that the story of Michelle's life in school would prove so pivotal in driving my own thought as I completed my MA degree at LIU and subsequently entered a doctoral program. At the writing center, I was *formally* tutoring Michelle; I didn't realize that she was also *informally* tutoring me. As a PhD student, I encountered critical social theories about race and class that drew my explicit attention to themes I did not perceive earlier.

What Michelle and I left out of our discussion of Walker's essay leads me to a discussion of how the institution's pedagogical discourses are not neutral in socially constructing the self. An institution's discourses embody and encourage ways of being, doing, and thinking. Scholars such as John Trimbur and JoAnne Podis and Leonard Podis have proposed seeing 'the patriarchal family' as a model structuring these processes. As part of his analysis of the circulation of writing in college composition classrooms, Trimbur argued that writing teachers have a particular role to play in developing students' capacity to interpret reality and to make meaning in the world. This pedagogical undertaking assumes the contours of the patriarchal family, Trimbur claimed, because "composition figur[es] classroom life as middle class family drama, in which the teacher, *in loco parentis*, calls directly on students to account for themselves" (191). In other words, college students are typically writing and performing for the teacher's judgment alone, which gives the classroom the intimate, "domestic" nature of immediate approval from authority. This domestic metaphor extends to the writing center as well, I would argue, where I worked with Michelle intensively on her standard usage. Though I can never know for sure why Michelle chose to tell her fire story to me, perhaps she intuited that I was obliged to hear her confession and yet would do nothing to endanger her secret, because I was in loco parentis, maternally aiding her, acting in essence, as a member of the "family," as Trimbur proposed. Inasmuch as she

felt she could trust me because of our familial-style bonds, I was also accountable to her not to judge her badly for her actions.

Other Compositionists like Donna Strickland ("How"), Sharon Crowley ("Personal Essay") and Lynn Z. Bloom ("Freshman") have also noted that institutional discourses in educational settings impose middle-class standards like rules for proper behavior and correct discourse. For example, Bloom especially argued a strong case for the middle-class values in which writing classrooms are steeped:

> Composition is taught by middle-class teachers in middle-class institutions to students who are middle class either in actuality or in aspiration. . . . When students learn to write . . . they also absorb a vast subtext of related folkways, the why and how of good citizenship. . . . Like swimmers passing through the chlorine footbath en route to plunging into the pool, students must first be disinfected in Freshman English. (656)

Bloom's Freshman-English-as-chlorine-footbath metaphor represents this curricular enterprise as an institutional cleansing agent or cultural disinfectant through which dirty low-class habits are purged through a certain training regimen based in standard usage and middle-class correctness. Though LIU is not a middle-class institution in its student base or in its budget, it serves middle-class functions because it aims to change working-class students' language, tastes, goals, manners, habits, dress, etc., in a middle-class direction. Bloom's claim that such values of correctness, good manners, proper dress, fastidious attention to detail, and so on, characterize middle-class life suggests that middle-class people own these values of propriety. It is probably more accurate to say that these values of good behavior are often associated with the middle class or, as Wendy Ryden argued, that such

qualities may be "more accurately viewed as values the American middle classes desire the working classes to possess to ensure the latter's usefulness" (14).

Bloom also connected the transformation of working-class students like Michelle into middle-class graduates to Bourdieu's theories of distinctive, class-based, social and cultural capital. For Bourdieu, people internalize identities and values from the social location of their childhood communities and develop a "habitus," or learned structure of preferences and orientations that, as Bourdieu wrote, "function[s] below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny, or control by the will" (466). The habitus is a "structuring structure," a system of "internalized embodied schemes" that marks a person's social class membership and makes him or her seem or feel "naturally suited to positions and occupations" (467). Bourdieu, the sociologist, critically explored the class-based processing in education that profoundly shapes students' consciousness whereas Bloom, the writing scholar, ironically described composition's middle-class socializing effects. But her picture does not account for the grave difficulty assimilating low-income and working-class students into middle-class discourses and habits in the brief space of one or two semesters of First-Year Composition (FYC). Nor did Bloom question the viability of such a project in the absence of middle-class jobs at the end of the college pipeline. Despite the inspiring stories of exemplars like upwardly-mobile Carl, non-elite colleges may actually function to move most students *laterally* because of the high drop-out rate which returns many to the unskilled workforce and because of the low-wage professions that such non-elite degrees command in the job market. A critical discourse which questions the largely lateral motion involved in such collegiate exchanges is a narrative missing from the institution's representation of itself in ritual moments such as Commencement, as I suggested earlier. Not

surprisingly, it is also the critical discourse missing from Michelle's own immigrant narrative. These missing critical discourses also provide an important counterpoint to Bloom's theory that FYC is a middle-class enterprise. If middle-class institutions produce middle-class students, then such non-elite colleges like LIU that enroll a majority working-class population also reproduce the status quo by engaging such students in a long and unacknowledged lateral movement mis-represented as middle-class mobility. Michelle's experience after graduation illuminates one case of this lateral motion despite the upward narrative of college graduation.

About one year after commencement, I met Michelle to interview her about her experiences at LIU and to see where her degree had taken her so far. Though we had kept in touch, I had not worked closely with her since she passed the required writing courses. It was strange to see her outside of the familiar campus world where we had first come to know each other. We met in a bar in a busy Manhattan shopping district. The first piece of news that she shared with me was that her mother had died a little more than a year before. While their relationship had never been strong, Michelle said she felt a great deal of lingering sadness. Michelle's mother had immigrated from Haiti to create the foundations for her children to move up, to attend college. She had endured years apart from her family to make Michelle's American Dream possible, but she died of a heart attack before Michelle's graduation. She was sixty-four.

After we talked about her mother's death, I asked Michelle to reflect back on her experience as a student, as a child of her mother's legacy. I told Michelle that I had always taken great pride in her progress and, on the day she graduated, I had shared in her joy. However, I was disappointed to learn during our interview that Michelle had still not

received her diploma or official transcript from the college. It turned out that, although Michelle had completed all requirements for the degree, she had not paid part of her last tuition bill. She still owed LIU over $4,000.00 in addition to accumulated student loans that she could not afford to pay. Such a debt was keeping her from exchanging the cultural capital of her degree for economic capital in the job market. Though Michelle had walked in graduation a few months earlier, the college would not release her transcript or send her a diploma.

To make matters worse, Michelle, who desperately needed a bona fide, middle-class job, had trouble finding suitable employment. She was working as a teacher's assistant in a school for children with Attention Deficit Disorder for which she earned only $14,000.00 per year, below the poverty line. She had hoped for better and had been led to expect better. In order to pay her rent on her one bedroom Bronx apartment, she was working a second job in a West Village clothing store. Michelle knew she couldn't keep the frenetic schedule up for long. Even working two jobs, she was only slowly paying off the money she owed LIU. Her student loans were in deferment, but she expected to begin making payments on her $50,000 debt within a few months. Because of her financial problems, Michelle told me that she was also considering allowing her boyfriend, an African-American man who never enrolled in college, to move in with her so that she could save money on rent.[17]

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[17] In their 2007 study of the benefits of higher education to minority women, Attewell and Lavin wrote that "black women outdistance black men in educational attainment" and are more likely, then, to marry or partner with men with lower incomes. Thus, a history of discrimination against black men in education and employment contributes to large household income disparities between educated black women and their white counterparts (*Passing* 50).

Michelle also reported that she had recently applied for a job at a social service agency that specialized in counseling homeless women and children, exactly the kind of job she had hoped to find after college. Michelle had interviewed for the position, but was disappointed when the hiring manager asked to see an official college transcript to confirm her degree. The manager insisted that a college degree was necessary for the job. Since Michelle was still paying off her tuition bill, she could not produce the transcript. The day I met with her, she was preparing to call the employer to tell her the news that she could no longer be considered for the position. The social service job paid $33,000 per year with full benefits, not yet a middle-class income by New York City standards but certainly a big step up. Michelle said "that's more money than I've ever seen in my life!"[18] She was certainly hopeful, but I was devastated for Michelle, though I did my best not to depress her. Because of my middle-class habitus and because I had long ago assumed a mentoring role in my relationship with her, I was not satisfied with letting bureaucratic roadblocks interfere with my life and didn't think Michelle should be satisfied either. I suggested that she contact someone she knew in the Psychology Department to help her get access to her transcript. Did she have a former professor or an advisor she could call? As I tried to come up with a plan to get her official transcript, Michelle insisted there was nothing to be done except slowly pay off the debt. In fact, though Michelle had been a student at LIU for six years, she claimed not to know a single person in her major department that she could call for help or advice. In her mind, it seemed, her relationship with the institution ended when she finished her courses (an

[18] In 2006 in New York City, the Department of Housing and Urban Development listed the Average Median income for a family of four at $70,900. Since Michelle, at the time, was living alone, the $33,000 salary for the social worker position would put her far below the median, making it difficult to afford housing and other expenses while paying off her loans.

abrupt end that contrasts sharply with the lifelong attachment elite colleges often maintain with their graduates). The college owed nothing to her that it hadn't already provided: *access* to a degree. This could be described as Michelle's working-class "consumer" relationship to higher education, I would say, rather than a middle-class one that expects a long-term connection between education, teachers, school, and career. As Bourdieu theorized, Michelle's assessment of her possibilities reflects a habitus of low-expectations that she was written into and into which she continued to write herself. As Bourdieu proposed:

> Objective limits become a sense of limits, a practical anticipation of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits, a 'sense of one's place' which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded. (471)

Michelle was not able to get the college to release her transcript because she lacked economic capital to pay off her debt and social capital to pull strings so that a professor might get her a copy of the official document. These economic and social gaps, in turn, interfered with her ability to use the cultural capital of her degree and training. Though Michelle did imagine herself adequately prepared to take on the tasks of the better-paying job, she was stalled in a cycle of debt and low-wage work that college completion could not yet free her from. If it is true that Michelle's sense of her own 'objective limits' had not necessarily expanded as a result of her experience as a college student, it becomes possible to ask whether a college degree (at least one from a non-selective college) was a good investment for her. She had begun to see middle-class employment possibilities on the horizon, but she was still a black woman and an immigrant from a poor, non-English speaking country who felt lucky to have what she had managed to earn. Yet, questions about

the long-term consequences of Michelle's degree are outside the time frame of this study, especially since LIU keeps no records of how students fare in the job market after graduation. It will be obvious to most readers that nontraditional students who must borrow so heavily to pay private college tuition run greater financial risks than do traditional students or students who use the less-expensive public sector. Though national statistics indicate that college degree holders *do* earn substantially more than do non-college graduates annually and over their lifetime,[19] there is evidence that the selectivity of an institution goes a long way towards determining the eventual earning power of its graduates. One study on the incomes of college degree holders noted that "the wage gap between graduates from high-quality private colleges and those from low-quality public institutions has almost tripled between 1994 and 1997 (a 7% gap in 1994 vs. a 20% gap in 1997)" (Thomas and Zhang 449). Thus, wage gaps between non-elite and elite college graduates are not a result of lowered intellectual standards in an era of mass access, as some have argued (Fish). Instead, lower-tier universities that distribute non-elite degrees cannot pass on distinctive cultural, social, and symbolic capital to its students as selective colleges do to theirs.

Other scholars (Grubb and Lazerson "Vocationalism"; Anyon *Radical*; Sacks) have noted that the twentieth century has been characterized by exponential growth of many different kinds of institutions of higher learning, from second- and third-tier four-year colleges to community colleges that focus on teaching narrow occupational skills. Such

[19] In 2007, Paul Attewell and David Lavin surveyed women admitted to CUNY in the early 1970s, when tuition was free. Thirty years later, they found that women who graduated took as many as 15 years to do so and reported an average annual economic benefit of $7,525. For black women the figure was $5002. This modest increment was perhaps worth the enormous time and energy these women devoted to college study, but perhaps the degree alone does not explain such an increase in economic capital (*Passing* 192).

colleges feed into the low-wage labor market, unlike more prestigious colleges that prepare elite students for salaried professions. Echoing Annette Lareau, education sociologists Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel wrote:

> [A] wide body of empirical evidence shows substantial gaps in educational attainment among students of different social backgrounds and significant under-representation in the system's upper tiers of minority students and students from modest socioeconomic backgrounds. The qualities that lead to success in the education system are no doubt partly personal. But they are also to a considerable degree linked to advantages of birth and especially to family cultural resources. (224)

Mass enrollment in higher education cannot yet be lauded for shifting the unfavorable terms under which most non-elite students attend college, earn degrees, and seek employment, especially when many such students never complete their degrees. Even when non-elite students do complete college, there are not enough jobs in the economy to meet the demands of an increasingly educated workforce, a phenomenon called "overschooling." As Grubb and Lazerson wrote, "about 35-40 percent of those in the labor force in the United States may have too much schooling for their jobs" (*The Education* 205).[20] The fact is that, since the 1970's, there have been more college-degree holders in the US than there have been jobs that require a four-year degree. As Bourdieu argued, when a distinctive advantage becomes widely-held, it loses its distinction. Thus, though a college degree has become more widely available in the past forty years, the economy has not produced an increasing number of well-

[20] Grubb and Lazerson made an important distinction between the terms "overschooling" which means workers have too much formal schooling for their jobs and "overeducation" which doesn't exist in any quantifiable measure (*The Education* 205).

paid jobs suited to this new mass of collegiate labor, thus undermining the job-market value of degrees. Mass higher education, then, with its "profusion of degrees and diplomas" contributes to the "blurring of hierarchies and boundaries between the elected and the rejected, between true and false qualifications" (Bourdieu 155). Only degrees from the most distinguished, most costly venues retain their distinctive payoff in the job market, while college degrees from the hundreds of lesser campuses cannot deliver the same result. For the students in this study and for those at LIU generally, a hard-earned diploma cannot guarantee a middle-class job as it once did.

Still, students at non-selective campuses like LIU may have few if any choices other than accessing a high-cost college, and for many the myth persists that higher education is the key to financial security and professional status. While some debt-free graduates like Carl land well-paid professional jobs, many more unfunded and indebted undergraduates will move laterally, from low-wage position to low-wage position, in an economy where wages for most workers have been stagnant for three decades or more. The difficulty LIU graduates may face in the job market is a class-based problem for which Commencement discourse had only an individual solution: "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps." The jobs and wages crisis cannot be solved for the majority of graduates unless it is addressed explicitly and politically. Without a class-based movement based in job-creation and wage-enhancing policies, all students are basically competing against each other for a handful of good jobs. As an ally of and advocate for students, I want them to succeed, but I know that failure is structured into the process and into the futures of most, no matter how well they do or how hard they struggle.

V

The wide gap between the rhetoric of education as a path to advancement and the vocational reality many students face points to a dominant rhetoric of misrepresentation at work in school and society. This rhetoric goes by various names (bootstrapping individualism, equal opportunity). Such misrepresentation means college access which produces great loan debt and transcripts of academic failure are what Bourdieu called "hidden forms of elimination" trumpeted as signs of equality and fairness (154). This rhetoric is part one what sociologist Burton Clark named long ago "the cooling-out function in higher education." Clark wrote that "democracy asks individuals to act as if social mobility were universally possible . . . But democratic societies also need selective training institutions, and hierarchical work organizations permit increasingly fewer persons to succeed at ascending levels" (569). The cooling-out function is an institutional process of downwardly managed expectations that includes promising more while delivering less while displacing blame for failure from the institution and society to the individual.

In 2005, well before the economic crisis of 2008, Barbara Ehrenrich identified such rhetoric as "bait and switch," an operative term to describe what happened when millions of college-educated professionals found themselves among the unemployed, underemployed, or under-paid after the boom years of the 1990's ended. Posing as a white-collar job seeker, Ehrenreich distributed her resumé at employment fairs and networking seminars. As she met other disaffected people along the way, Ehrenreich described the sense of lonely, atomized individualism that characterized these job searches.

> The [job] seeker soon encounters ideologies that are explicitly hostile to any larger, social understanding of his or her situation. . . . [T]here was only us, the job

> seekers. It was we who had to change. In milder form, the constant injunction to maintain a winning attitude carries the same message: look inward, not outward; the world is entirely what you will it to be. (220-1)

Here again is Bourdieu's "cult of the self" underlying dominant discourse (415) and interfering with the development of Mills's "sociological imagination." Ehrenreich focused on the white-collar professionals whose college degrees and previous experience did not protect them from the unemployment line in the late 90's. A few years later, when Carl and Parsons delivered their bootstraps addresses at Commencement, neither they nor LIU acknowledged the limited payoff actually available from mass higher education. To do so would risk discrediting more than LIU'S pricey tuition. It would discredit a whole systemic rhetoric of opportunity and advancement that represents the status quo as fair, open, and responsive to personal initiative.

Deceptive institutional discourses like "cooling-out" and "bait and switch" form consciousness by shaping expectations. After considering Michelle's post-graduation experience, can non-elite higher education serving working-class students cloak itself in narratives of middle-class mobility when low graduation rates and deep debt are so widely distributed? Would the time and money in achieving a degree in four to eight years be better spent by starting a small business, by organizing workplace unions, or by other investments of time and money elsewhere? As Andy, whose experience I discussed in "Chapter Three", might have asked: is there an 'elsewhere'? Bourdieu suggested one answer in his discussion of how educational achievement can produce different outcomes for different people depending on a complex of factors that inform identity:

> …[T]he value of an educational qualification and the associated relation to the social world vary considerably according to the bearer's age . . . social origin (inasmuch as inherited social capital–name, family, connections etc. govern its real profitability) and also, no doubt, geographical origin . . . and sex. (438)

Bourdieu asserted that a college degree's distinctive value is not universal or abstract but is social and historical, conditioned by the distinction of the college granting the degree as well as the distinction of the degree field, as well as the graduate's gender, ethnicity, age, and background. A degree (that Michelle hadn't officially received) from a non-selective college does not guarantee the cultural and social capital that non-elite students need to move into the middle class. These 'objective limits' become even more harmful because earning a college degree has become a required credential for most middle-class jobs. It may be that non-selective colleges that aspire to move non-elite students into middle-class occupations cannot graduate most of their students, first, and second, only some of those who do graduate will accumulate sufficient cultural and social capital for upward mobility. In other words, the value of a non-elite college degree is measured by how it relates to other material conditions such as social connections, cultural know-how, age, gender, and economic means.

Michelle herself hinted at the possibilities and the limitations of her academic success. When, during one of our last interviews, I asked her to reflect generally about her experience as an LIU student, she smiled. "I'm blessed," she said. "Nobody in Haiti gets to go to college. America gave me what my own country couldn't offer me. If I were the kind of person to read and study myself then I wouldn't need LIU. But, it turned out, I really needed the structure." Michelle's experience at LIU promoted her reverence not necessarily for her

own abilities but for the college that had given her a chance (access) and the country where that institution is located (the American Dream).

Michelle, born in the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, managed to graduate college in the cultural capital of the world, New York, where she made remarkable progress as a reader and writer. Despite everything, I conclude that she is certainly still ahead of the game. Had Michelle stayed in Haiti (perhaps the negative 'elsewhere' I questioned above), her fate would doubtless have been much worse. This mixed and relative assessment stands out in words she offered that were strikingly different from the narratives that both valedictorian Carl and guest-of-honor Parsons emphasized at graduation: "I have an education now, yes," Michelle said, "But I am in the hole. Am I going to be able to have and support a family someday? Or is this my American dream? Am I living it now?"

In Buroway's terms, Michelle is always already anomalous because of the desperate impoverishment from which she began. Merely immigrating to the United States radically shifted the terms of her life. Yet Michelle also acknowledged that her hard-won degree had left her in a financial hole from which she may not emerge. Her individual case, then, is a narrative that contradictorily confirms and transcends the rhetorics of deception and critique which circulate around her and about her. Complex, richly meaningful, and sadly tragic, her story shows how far she and we have come and have not come at the same time.

Chapter Six

Writing Ethnography: Andy Lost and Found

In this dissertation, I have narrated and interpreted the experiences of four LIU basic writers whose stories illustrate a conundrum of mass higher education: non-elite college degrees cannot create employment opportunities for newly credentialed students absent the kind of macro-economic and labor policies that promote job growth, wage increases, and union bargaining power. In relating their individual stories to the social conditions that inform them, I have also discussed how my interpretations of these students' experiences are influenced by my own positionality as a researcher. In this chapter, I will further theorize my ethnographic methodology by examining an informal conversation between me and Andy (who I introduced in "Chapter Three") that illustrates some other complexities of case study research in institutional contexts.

As I mentioned earlier, Andy enthusiastically shared information with me about his life as a young man of color in New York and about the dreams that his immigrant parents had for their only child. Andy seemed to enjoy telling me these stories about himself. Our conversations were congenial and Andy's visits continued long after we had completed our final interview for this research. While in my office, he always offered me a protein bar from his backpack before helping himself to a similar, perhaps purloined, snack. He voluntarily returned to talk informally about the same issues and problems we had discussed during the formal interviews. Because Andy had shared an unusual amount of autobiographical detail with me, I felt obliged to find time for him; his generosity compelled my own. I allowed him to hang out and chat and, after several impromptu conversations, it became apparent that

Andy liked such a meaningful connection with a 'faculty member.' (Not actual faculty, I was an administrator then, the Associate Director of the Writing Center.) My very busy work day restricted the time I could spend enjoying long, mentoring conversations with students. So, marginally employed as I was, in a demanding job, I eventually had to limit the time Andy, or any student, could expect. The loss from this limit is that these post-research visits from Andy turned out being as valuable as the prior formal interviews. In fact, not surprisingly, I often found that the students in this study were more relaxed and open in such informal conversations, an important corollary to the traditional "Q and A plus follow up" of research-based discourse. Smart, already employed, and talkative, Andy would even leave his backpack while he went to class so he would have to come back to retrieve it, thus engineering more time for the conversation he desired. What exactly was he getting from this exchange when it was no longer formally structured as "research"?

One claim in this dissertation is that our two-way exchange was mutually beneficial which points to an ethic for critical ethnography. During one visit, for example, Andy mentioned that he was looking for a better job. He had been in a bad brawl at a Queens dance club a few weeks before (he showed up in my office the next day with a black eye) and said he wanted to keep out of trouble by working extra hours. During this early interview, well before his short stint at Rikers Island for his involvement in a confrontation on the Lower East Side, I was surprised to hear that Andy had been involved in a fight. He struck me as easy-going, not the kind of young man who would get angry or act aggressively. In addition to fears about keeping out of trouble so he could be the good son of immigrant parents that he wanted to be, Andy often complained that he needed money to pay his cell phone bill or to buy a new hooded sweatshirt. Though he already worked part-time at a health food and

vitamin store for about eight dollars an hour, Andy was at a loss for how to look for a better-paying job. Unlike valedictorian Carl whose scholarship included a guaranteed part-time job while he was in school and unlike Elizabeth who focused on the symbolic rewards of her college success, Andy's employment situation while in college was a source of insecurity and anxiety like the kind that plagued Michelle after graduation. He came to me for help.

I was aware of the difficulties men of color face in New York City when it comes to finding employment. In 2006, well before the 2008 recession, *The New York Times* had reported historically high unemployment rates for African-American males in New York. Only about 50% of black men overall were employed, for example, compared with more than 75% of white men (Eckholm "Plight"). Youth unemployment rates tended to be even higher in the inner city. Andy's request for job-hunting advice was good decision-making on his part. Like other graduate students my age, I had worked various restaurant jobs before my writing center position; these restaurants almost always had young men of color on staff and I knew there was money to be made in those places. However, at first, I hesitated to tell Andy what I knew because such intervention risked crossing a line between researcher and subject. I was supposed to be interviewing and theorizing his life, not changing it. By improving his economic condition, I would perhaps alter his very relation to college that I was endeavoring to study. Where would the research end and the mentorship begin? Would my advice about job hunting and my insider's academic knowledge affect the way he answered my research questions? Was he simply putting on a performance, telling me what he thought I wanted to hear in interviews and informal dialogue, so as to raise my own stake

in helping him?[21] Was he emphasizing–even exaggerating–provocative details from his life, extending the time he could spend in my office cultivating me as a mentor? Would I risk the validity of my research by advising him?

Such questions about power, agency, and validity in research with human subjects dominate contemporary critiques of ethnography. These critiques argue that ethnography, which emerged from the discipline of cultural anthropology, has a history of exoticizing people and cultures by privileging the (usually white, male, European) gaze of the observer who carries into local sites non-local values of western, middle-class, and academic culture, and who takes away career-building material for publication. Some relief in this dilemma is offered by critical social theories such as postmodernism and feminism which deny the possibility of an objective, outsider point-of-view from which to judge subjects. These theories have at their base the foundational premise that a qualitative researcher can never understand subjects like Andy "objectively" because every researcher's perspective is informed by a complex positionality that shapes the research design and the researcher's decoding of data. My own white, female, professional identity, my values as a certain kind of practicing compositionist, and my employment as an officer in the same institution where Andy was a student are the coordinates which plot my own positionality as researcher. That position does not traditionally include job placement advice, though any advice I might offer Andy about employment would help him in the short term for sure, and perhaps in the long run as well. What Andy hoped to gain from our exchange was concrete and explicit and such an intervention on the researcher's part could be a factor altering the terms of Andy's life. My

[21] Linda Flower called this dilemma the "experimenter effect" which, she wrote, can be mitigated by asking open-ended questions and encouraging informers to narrate, rather than evaluate, critical incidents from their lives (141).

authority as a source of occupational knowledge about the rules of the game for job seeking in the city was apparently valuable cultural capital which Andy badly needed to pay his bills and to keep him out of trouble. Wading into this conundrum, I did offer Andy job-hunting advice (more on this later), as I kept concerns in the back of my mind. On the other hand, though I wanted to avoid a 'quid pro quo' situation, I also considered that by mentoring Andy, he might go into deeper detail in his responses to my questions if he saw our relationship as mutually beneficial.

II

During the 1990's, scholars engaged questions about the validity of qualitative research with human subjects to reconsider how ethnography (of which case study is a part) could be a strong instrument for representing the social world. An early example of ethnography's reconsideration in the social sciences is Michael Buroway's and colleagues' 1991 *Ethnography Unbound*: *Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis (EU)*. In *EU*, the authors engage critiques of ethnography's imperialist history and potential. In traditional ethnography, a researcher (a person Renato Rosaldo satirically called a "lone ethnographer") entered a research site, often under the auspices of a colonial regime, to write a "true account" of "the culture" (*Culture* 30). The "lone ethnographer" then leaves the site exactly as he found it and returns to the metropolitan university where his work is read and evaluated by first-world colleagues. Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street argued that such critiques of ethnography are part of "an admission of collective guilt over the colonial roots of the discipline" (*On Ethnography* 123). Pratt's theory of 'auto-ethnography', which I mentioned in "Chapter Three," as a bottom-up response against the top-down portrayal of subordinate

groups by 'imperial eyes,' was part of this effort to reimagine ethnography as an ethical method for research. Like Pratt, Buroway acknowledged the field's imperialist past by placing questions of power at the center of a new ethnographic practice. In other words, critical ethnographers don't pretend to gather "objective" results that definitively explain the meaning of "natives'" behavior for audiences back home in the metropole. Instead, Buroway simultaneously refocused and broadened ethnography into a method that examines the relationship between individuals and groups embedded in larger social structures that shape their experience. Buroway wrote that critical ethnography in the social sciences should examine "the way in which everyday life in the metropolis is continually eroded, distorted, overpowered by, and subordinated to institutional forces that seem beyond human control" (1). Buroway defined ethnography as the study of the dialectical relationship between the macro—or structural—world and the micro—or day-to-day—world of human experience and observation. Most importantly for this dissertation, Buroway placed institutions and institutional power at the center of a new, case-study-based practice that asks how students, in their daily lives, internalize *and* resist institutional regulation and control. Though Buroway and his co-authors did not explicitly advocate "giving back" to their research participants by becoming allies and advocates, they emphasize ethnography's potential to "enhance the control participants exercise over their lives" by establishing some mutuality between researcher and participant and by seeking out and creating alternatives within apparently rigid systems (282).

For Buroway and his colleagues, creating such alternatives in research with human subjects means not just looking for ways that micro-experiences confirm macro-theories. Rather, an important component in Buroway's method for studying people in institutional

settings is *the anomaly*. Critical ethnographers uncover anomalies by juxtaposing macro-social relations with competing perceptions at the micro-experiential level. For example, Buroway's volume includes an essay by Nadine Gartrell who studied an experimental tutorial program in an inner city elementary school in Oakland where most of the students were African American. The program, "Project Interface", required parents to participate in the school lives of their children by coming to meetings, visiting classrooms, and by providing "appropriate conditions" at home for children to complete homework (22). Gartrell admitted to being skeptical that such a system would work because it could not fundamentally change the serious disadvantages that working-class children already bring with them to schools that are middle class in orientation. However, Gartrell found that because the program also included "a higher quality of instruction . . . and smaller classes and more highly motivated tutors", it was actually effective in facilitating "interaction among students, teachers and administrators" and bridging the home and school discourses for this small group of working-class students (22). Though Gartrell was not optimistic that such school programs can be effective for the majority of African Americans who face higher rates of poverty than whites, her study revealed that some cultural theory may be founded on over-deterministic assumptions about the static nature of cultural obstacles to success in school. Some micro-interventions can apparently effect some useful, situated improvements.

Like Gartrell's experience in an Oakland classroom, the dynamics of my relationship with Andy before and after my interviews defied my expectations on multiple levels. As a researcher and a writing center administrator, I assumed I had authority over any student in my study. I expected that I would have to be careful not to abuse that authority when writing about Andy's life as a basic writer at LIU. In fact, what I learned is that Andy, like Carl,

actually had effective control over the kinds of information he shared with me, if not control over how I might use such information in my published research. Like Carl who was, perhaps, more careful than I had originally imagined in managing my impression of him, Andy also had his own agenda when it came to benefiting from our relationship in ways that went beyond what I could do for him in my official capacity as a researcher or a writing instructor. The anomaly here is our shared and parallel authority based on our mutual interaction over separate agendas, rather than my unilateral possession of authority and control. Buroway suggested that critical ethnographers use such anomalous experiences to re-examine theories that purport to explain human behavior or, in this case, the apparent authority of a researcher with higher status over a participant with lesser standing. "Rather than treating the social situation as the confirmation of some theory," Buroway wrote, "we regard it as the failure of a theory. But that failure leads not to the rejection but to the rebuilding of theory" (9). By focusing on the points of contradiction between theory and localized experiences, critical ethnography can enrich our understanding of both, perhaps improving our ability to describe how subordinated individuals and groups negotiate–at the local level–the powerful macro forces that shape identity and perception. With this mutual perspective in mind, one of the purposes of studying the effects of institutions and their discourses on the people who inhabit them, then, is to give a higher profile to negotiation and resistance strategies that subordinate groups already employ.

For example, my multiple interactions with Andy suggest that, in addition to academic support, students like him need what I have called 'cross-cultural mediators': insiders at the institutional level who can translate in effective form some of the social and cultural capital that working-class and poor students cannot accumulate on their own. The

fact that Michelle, who I discussed in the previous chapter, reported feeling surprised to find herself underemployed after she had, more or less, earned a college degree suggests that no insider with cultural knowledge of the real relationship between higher education and the economy had explained to her that an expensive degree from a non-selective college was not necessarily a ticket to the middle class. As this dissertation shows, cross-cultural mediation and transfer of capital–from teachers to students and from researchers to subjects–can be crucial in such students' progress towards the four-year degree; it can also be crucial in leveling with students by providing them with concrete information about what their post-graduation prospects are likely to be. Highlighting such contradictions between dominant discourses and the actual experiences of individuals is a key method in *Ethnography Unbound*.

After Buroway's volume appeared, critical ethnographers in Composition also began to engage postmodern critiques of ethnography to reclaim it as a method for Composition Studies. In 2004, compositionists Stephen Gilbert-Brown and Sidney Dobrin edited an anthology also entitled, remarkably enough, *Ethnography Unbound*. Even more remarkable is the fact that none of the essays in the Gilbert-Brown and Dobrin text cited Buroway's earlier *Ethnography Unbound.* Given the growing stature of critical theory in the years between the first and second volumes of the same title, it is not surprising that the later *EU* reimagined ethnography along the same lines proposed by Buroway's volume. Like Buroway and his colleagues, Gilbert-Brown and Dobrin and their contributors also rejected the myth of an objective ethnographic observer who studies other people and cultures for data that confirm a macro-theory about the social world. They also reject that version of postmodernism that paralyzes ethnographic practice by placing unfair ethical and political

burdens on researchers by arguing that ethnographic work is inherently imperialist. Instead, Gilbert-Brown and Dobrin proposed that researchers have an obligation to give back to participants by designing projects that are mutually beneficial and they argue that institutions have an obligation to offer material resources like the time to spend long periods gathering data in research sites and the money to support such endeavors. Also like Buroway, Gilbert-Brown and Dobrin saw institutions–educational sites in particular–as important locations for studying how people internalize and resist institutional power in their everyday lives. In particular, these compositionists viewed critical ethnography as part of a larger social justice movement:

> Critical Ethnography . . . shift[s] the goal of praxis away from the acquisition of knowledge about the Other . . . to the formation of a dialogic relationship with the Other whose destination is the transformation of material conditions that immediately oppress, marginalize, or otherwise subjugate the ethnographic participant. (*Ethnography* 5)

Gilbert-Brown and Dobrin suggested that critical ethnographers build coalitions with ethnographic participants to engage the problems that re/produce oppressive conditions, a democratic project exemplified in Linda Flower's "community literacy" work connecting the rhetoric program at Carnegie-Mellon with a literacy center in Pittsburgh's inner city. In this way, Gilbert-Brown and Dobrin accepted the partial and interested positionality of any researcher but still endorsed a mutuality that legitimizes researchers' use of human subjects. In this regard, I read Andy's persistence in relating to me after the formal research ended as a tool of his own making, not something I engineered. To manage his subordinate position at LIU and his apparent powerlessness in the face of bureaucratic requirements, he sought out

people (like me) who he could use for accumulating valuable social and cultural capital (insider advice). Our mentor-mentee arrangement allowed us to exchange capital because Andy was making possible my own academic progress by enabling the research underlying my dissertation. I began to wonder how to facilitate similar exchanges of capital between researchers and subjects not through a one-way road of *our knowledge about them*, but rather through a mutual *dialogue with them* that facilitates an exchange. In this regard, both *Ethnography Unbound*s suggest that some sociologists and compositionists are indeed engaged in similar projects to revisit ethnography as a method for reinventing the relationship between people and institutional power and between researchers and subjects. Both disciplines place postmodern critiques of ethnography at the center of a critical practice that engages with students in institutional sites to enable dialogue and mentoring rather than just one-way benefits to the researcher's academic career. Mutuality, then, helps name an ethnographic practice built on a defensible ethic.

From the point of view of my benefit as the ethnographer, career-advancement as an outcome of completed, published research is certainly valuable. But my unique encounter with Andy over his job problems revealed some of his benefits (and his agency) as well and helped me see my encounters with the other students in this study from a different angle. I realized that, though Andy explicitly sought me out as a mentor, other students had related to me as a mentor in more implicit ways. As I mentioned before, Elizabeth may have enjoyed our interviews an informal conversations because I helped assuage some of her loneliness. As I sympathized with her family problems and encouraged her in her struggle to learn academic discourse, I also validated her goals. As a mentor to Michelle, I was the only teacher or official from the institution that she had maintained a relationship with after

graduation and she often sought me out for advice and informal counseling. Even Carl, whose confident self-assurance made him appear unflappable, seemed to value our conversations as opportunities to reflect on his well-deserved reputation as an academic star and exemplar graduate. These mentoring experiences, which grew out of ethnographic research, point to an ethical practice of professionals who mentor working-class students unfamiliar with the protocols of higher education or, in Andy's case, with the way to find better-paying entry-level jobs in New York. This multi-year dissertation project allowed me a long time frame through which I could elevate Andy's non-research needs (and those of other students) to a place next to my own needs as an ethnographer dependent on willing subjects to do her work.

In the case of Andy, I did eventually suggest that he turn to restaurant work as a short-term solution to his financial problems. In an earlier life, as I stated before, I waited tables and frothed cappuccino at a fancy downtown restaurant where the hours were long and arduous, but the tips were good enough to finance my living in New York City. As a white, college-educated woman born into the middle class and living in a white-dominated city, I brought to this corner of the job market symbolic capital of higher distinction than students of color generally possess; thus, I was in a better position than was Andy to know where people with money went for a night out. Still, Andy greeted this know-how (cultural capital) with some skepticism. The following is an approximate rendition of our conversation:

Andy: A restaurant? You mean like TGIF? [A moderately-priced franchise]

Ann: No, no. If you want to make money in a restaurant, you have to work where people who have a lot of money go to eat.

Andy: Where do they go?

I then suggested some likely places where he might apply, names obviously missing from Andy's working-class habitus. I too had never eaten at these elite places, but the difference is that my habitus included knowledge of such sites even without going to them because my background had taught me to recognize upper-class consumption practices. Such a dense political subtext underlined the relatively simple utterance through which I told Andy about the restaurant where I had worked before going to graduate school. I even showed him the website with a menu that included a $30 steak and a $55 chicken dish. Andy expressed no small surprise that people spent that much money on *only one* chicken. The restaurant website listed the hours that potential employees could show up to apply for jobs. I then explained to Andy that, in my experience, upscale New York restaurants are reluctant to hire people of color to work as servers, the job that earns the most in such places. He would have to start as a busser or a food runner. That week, Andy filled out an application. To my great pleasure, the next week, he went for an interview. To my even greater surprise, he called a few days later to say he had been hired to bus tables! Before long, he was working four days per week and picking up extra shifts when he could while still attending classes. Like many working-class students who are forced to work long hours while in school, Andy had a difficult time keeping up with his studies. But, he still passed all courses that semester with a 'B' average. The fact that Andy asked for my advice, acted on it with such swiftness, and was able to juggle work and school is evidence that he possessed the kind of work ethic that valedictorian Carl and CEO Parsons had praised in their Commencement speeches. By the third week working breakfasts and lunches, Andy was making almost one hundred dollars

per shift in tips, more than he made at his previous job all week. Near the end of his first few weeks at the restaurant, Andy said he felt like things were looking up for him for the first time in a long time. He said, "I'm excited about the future."

I've acknowledged that my gender, race, and class habitus had prepared me to play the job game in ways not similarly accessible to Andy. Still, the speed with which Andy followed my lead was almost alarming insofar as my mentoring had such an instant and palpable impact on the conditions of his life. He trusted me as a mentor, not doubting my knowledge of the New York restaurant scene even though I cautioned him that it had been years since I had donned an apron in such places. But since Andy seemed happy with the results, I decided the situation was working out for both of us. Though Andy's new job is not a career for a potential college graduate, it paid him more than he previously earned; Andy was learning, through me in this instance, how to work one small part of the system to his individual advantage. Perhaps case study research, in some instances, transforms the researcher herself into a case. While I was gathering data to write this dissertation, Andy was apparently gathering data on me. He sized me up as a mentor and a source that could be valuable to him. Because of his initiative, I transferred to him some employment knowledge made possible by the different habitus I occupy. Obviously, we were both exercising effective agency and managing to learn from each other. In fact, in addition to job-hunting advice, Andy often consulted me about academic issues at the same time that I was asking him about his experience as a basic writer. In a sense, I am a face or a portal of the institution that Andy must learn to navigate if he is to succeed in college.

As this chapter has shown, scholars in Composition, Sociology and Literacy Studies have been involved in similar projects to redesign qualitative research that interrogates the

relationships between macro and micro and between researcher and subject at the outset. A good foundational source for this disciplinary bridging can be found in Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words,* a widely-read study of three communities in two small towns in the Carolinas. Though she does not employ a case study method, Heath's ethnography is instructive because of how she deals with the questions of power and authority. People from the communities Heath profiled had distinct language uses or literate practices which offered their children differing "literacy events" which led to differing school outcomes and social class identities. 'Trackton' was the name she gave to the segregated black working-class community and 'Roadville' was the name of the mostly white town, which had separate neighborhoods for its distinct white working-class and white middle-class groups. Working-class adults, white or black, worked in nearby textile mills and Roadville's white, middle-class families were headed by professionals. Heath, a part-time instructor at a state university in Anthropology and Education, was advising local teachers from the two communities while researching language practices at home and at school. She soon found that these students brought with them a great deal of language use learned in their home communities, but only the middle-class children brought language practices to school that complemented the one favored in class by their teachers. Both white and black working-class children used language in various richly meaningful ways but these divergent literate practices were nevertheless at odds with the linguistic performances required by their middle-class teachers. Heath's understanding of success and failure in school was enriched by her subsequent study of home-based language which she conducted by living and working among the people who became her research subjects.[22] Heath's work was conducted in collaboration with men and

[22] Some scholars have been critical of *Ways With Words* for failing to adequately account for

women from the two towns where she positioned herself as strictly an observer/participant. Though her subjects did not benefit from her research as I have been arguing that Andy apparently benefited from participating in mine, Heath's landmark study illustrates how qualitative research can begin in formal and informal relationships between students and teachers or between researchers and subjects.

Another example of the evolving, sometimes delicate nature of qualitative research is Michele Fine's and Lois Weis's *The Unknown City: Lives of Poor and Working Class Adults*. Fine and Weis spent several years interviewing more than 150 men and women from various racial and ethnic groups in urban centers. These case studies make up what the authors call a "biography of urban America" (1). Fine and Weis, two white, middle-class academics, demonstrated the possibilities and the challenges of conducting interviews with a diverse group of working-class men and women. Like Heath, Fine and Weis also developed friendships with some of the people they interviewed and were occasionally burdened with knowledge about some of their subjects' illegal or otherwise troubling behavior. Fine and Weis used these experiences to explore the complexities of critical ethnography including the tendency among qualitative researchers to include their own biographies to justify an interest in the lives of a particular group of research subjects. While Fine and Weis acknowledged the importance of not disguising their own roles as authors of their study, they also questioned how much of themselves to include:

> How much do we insert of our own relatively privileged lives into essays when we are chronicling lives under assault from the economy, the state, within

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the role that race and racism played in the literacy development of children in the 'Trackton' and 'Roadville'. For example, see Prendergast.

communities, and even homes? Yes *we* write the stories. . . . But self-conscious insertion of self remains an exhilarating, problematic, sometimes narcissistic task. (280)

Fine and Weis wrestled with a political and disciplinary climate that enables and limits certain kinds of rhetoric in research. If they put too much of themselves in the text, they risked being discredited in a social science paradigm that still prizes distanced objectivity. If they did not discuss their own roles and values at all, they risked failing to accurately represent their own positions in relation to their research. As part of their negotiation of these dynamics, Fine and Weis argued that ethnographic researchers "come clean at the hyphen" between researcher and researched, between self and other (278). In other words, they suggested that researchers remain aware of their own biases and positions without explicitly placing too much of themselves in narratives of others' problems and others' lives.

By including only limited autobiographical material in their texts, Fine and Weis echoed the concerns of Deborah Brandt who argued that a researcher's self-disclosure has a limited place in work that is supposed to be for the public interest: "While many people have been trying to figure out how to get the personal more responsibly into their published work," Brandt wrote, "I have been trying to figure out how responsibly to get it out" ("Politics" 42). Brandt treated her interviews and case studies as texts. Her subjects' words counted more because they informed her ideas about literacy, not because they helped her readers understand the life of any person in particular. Brandt wrote: "I try to subvert readers' psychologizing tendencies and get them to judge my ideas instead of the personal lives of the people who have informed them" (44). For Brandt, while a case study may be based on a research participant's personal narrative, it is not important to perfectly reconstruct the

person's life accurately so that she can always recognize herself. While a researcher must be a self-conscious observer, Brandt suggested that the personal can often distract from what the research has to teach about literacy. Brandt's work on literacy is also relevant to this dissertation because she is interested in how institutions and their discourses monitor and control the distribution of literacies. In "Sponsors of Literacy," for example, Brandt argued that whoever organizes or sponsors literacy acquisition–whether it is a school, an employer, or an industry–has a dramatic control over the shape and the ultimate uses of that literacy. In other words, Brandt's research examined the intersection between individuals and large social and economic processes and, like Heath, she argued that schools favor the kind of middle-class literacy skills students from these homes had already developed.

Critical race scholars have also conducted case study research that examines how individuals are positioned in a social and political matrix. In *White Women, Race Matters* Ruth Frankenberg used women's life stories and personal narratives to argue that "white women's lives [are] sites both for the reproduction of racism and for challenges to it" (1). Her interviews with research subjects did not constitute a random sample. Rather, Frankenberg "drew on a strong current of feminist thought that has used accounts of women's experience as grounds for the construction and critique of theory and strategy" (7). Frankenberg worked from the standpoint that narratives of personal experience can teach us a great deal about how people are socially constructed by the powerful social, economic, and political discourses that weave their way into everyday life. Through interviews and case study analysis, Frankenberg deepened our understanding of how white women's daily experiences shape and are shaped by "power-evasive discourses" that rationalize racial inequity by normalizing white privilege (15). Frankenberg also linked the personal and the social to

address the concerns of critics who don't think case studies can be objective sources of information. She wrote, "there is no disinterested position to be adopted in scholarship" (30). This is a thoroughly postmodern view of authorship which I've discussed above. Frankenberg accepted positionality as the 'always already' starting point of any project. To foreground her own positionality, Frankenberg placed issues of power and authority between researcher and participant at the center of her research–as a crucial part of the data itself–by refusing to play the role of the "blank-faced," neutral interviewer (35). While she asked formal questions of her subjects, Frankenberg often allowed the interviews to evolve into something more like a dialogue between her and her subjects, a kind of argumentative exchange of positions. When appropriate, she shared information about her own life and offered advice to interviewees when they asked for it. In this way, she approached her subjects as the complex, socially-constructed people they were rather than as points of dissociated data. Frankenberg's case studies produced in-depth analyses that allowed her to make generalizations about the social construction of herself and her subjects without reducing any into singular atomic particles in society or into mere exemplars of a macro-theory.

Like Frankenberg's study of white women's attitudes about race, Annette Lareau's 2003 study *Unequal Childhoods* (which I mentioned in "Chapter Two") explored the intersection of social theory and the quotidian in the lives of poor, middle- and upper-class families in urban and suburban neighborhoods. Lareau used Bourdieu's theory of forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) to discuss how parents from different classes undertake child-rearing that passes on unequal capital to their offspring. Reiterating Heath's conclusions but with richer focus on the class and race-based structures, Lareau found that children's experiences in school and other institutions are shaped by the habitus

passed down from their parents' social location that encourages structurally different attitudes and perceptions. By following the day-to-day activities of white and black families from different social classes for months, Lareau determined that parents raised children according to differing "cultural logics" which profoundly impacted how children viewed themselves and negotiated their relationship with institutions and with authority figures later in life (3). For example, Lareau noted that middle-class parents raised children according to a strategy she called "concerted cultivation" which intensely and consciously organized children's experience into a very busy week of dense and costly developmental activities. Parents with the greatest economic capital invested heavily in their children's development through elite schooling, after-school lessons, social gatherings, organized recreation, vacations, etc. In addition, concerted cultivation as the technique of affluent child-raising positioned parents to reason with children as if the children are adults. These children were encouraged in this way to see themselves as already carrying authority which they then displayed elsewhere in interactions with authority figures like doctors and teachers.

The working-class parents Lareau observed, on the other hand, raised their children in a process Lareau designated as the "accomplishment of natural growth." These non-elite children generally spent more time by themselves or with peers in unstructured activities rather than time with mentoring adults. Unlike their middle- and upper middle-class peers, working-class kids did not experience a "steady diet of adult organized activities" (3). In addition, working-class parents themselves often expressed a combination of fear and hostility towards authority figures, making it more difficult for them to cultivate their children's abilities to navigate successfully through schools, workplaces, and other institutions later in life. More emphatic in her conclusions than was Heath, Lareau discovered

that home culture dictated by class and race was the decisive feature in explaining school outcomes. By examining the relationship between culture, class, and institutional logics, Lareau provided one model for how researchers can use theory to illuminate the local and specific while at the same time improving on and adding to theories that describe the impact of social class on individuals.

My own methodology in this dissertation is based on the models discussed above. While this study is far more modest in scale than Heath's, Frankenberg's, or Lareau's, like them, I seek to foreground and to understand individual experiences within the domain of appropriate social theories. Like them, I seek to discover and parse varieties of agency and literacy in the nuances of everyday practice while also accepting that all theories or frameworks include *aporia,* or "holes," through which meaning escapes or eludes the researcher. Finally, like them, I also found myself on the side of my subjects, that is, understanding the key role that class, race, and gender played in their fates. Like Fine, Weis, Brandt, and even Heath, my hope is that my work adds to the research illuminating how material circumstances shape opportunities for all subjects, with a particular emphasis on non-elite students. Though I came to each interview with questions and a research agenda, like Frankenberg, I often let the script evolve in-process when students chose to follow a particular train of thought into new issues and topics important to them. I also shared some of my own thoughts and feelings with students when it seemed appropriate to do so. Like Brandt, I am reluctant to "psychologize" the students in this study and, though I am extremely invested in their life stories, I have never felt sorry for them. I also do not want to offer these students up to the reader as faceless data points in an argument about what basic writers who want to succeed in college should or should not do to help themselves. The

students in this study, like students anywhere, are the products of complex circumstances, a daunting reality for any researcher to represent.

All students profiled here were formally interviewed at least three times about six months apart. The formal interview sessions were often complemented by informal exchanges between the students and me. These exchanges almost always occurred at the initiation of students who voluntarily sought me out. Because I worked at LIU during the time I was collecting data for this dissertation and students knew where to find me, some, especially Andy, would stop by my office to share a story or anecdote they thought would interest me. Sometimes, unplanned informal conversations turned into more formal interviews, with me rushing to my computer to document something one of them had said. Occasionally, students in this study began to see me as a resource and they came to me for help with some academic or institutional problem, similar to how Andy approached me as a 'cross-cultural mediator' for various kinds of aid. I sometimes met with students off-campus to catch up with them after they had left the college. These dynamics complicated and enriched the formal interviews I conducted and influenced how I interpreted the results.

Andy's request and need for job help precipitated the research quandary and reflections on agency and methodology I described above. In "Chapter Two," I discussed the risk of projecting my expectations onto valedictorian Carl who, like Andy, occupied a very different habitus from mine. Because Carl and Andy are "cases" not reducible to each other, they also serve as separate examples for an argument about the relationships among institutions, discourses, and individual basic writers. Carl, a celebrity student who attributed success to individual effort and who showcased the bootstraps narrative of the American Dream, can be constructed as a legitimizing agent through which institutional discourses

validate their operations and distribute positive constructions of the status quo. In contrast to Carl and Elizabeth–two academic starts at LIU–Andy and Michelle are anonymous and struggling students who succeed here and fumble there in the hope that an expensive, low-status degree will payoff in the job market, a situation that raises questions about the enterprise of mass higher education itself.

However, I also want to complicate those generalizations by foregrounding the notion that, while Carl, Andy, Michelle, and Elizabeth serve as illustrative examples of typical struggles, they are also and always much more. In this regard, for example, Don Byrd, in *The Poetics of Common Knowledge*, questioned the tendency of some theorists to reduce individuals to the role of the exemplar. Byrd is concerned about how one can write about systems and myths without blurring the images of the real people and lives that one is trying to bring into focus. He argued that theories are good at "describing possibilities" but they too often obscure the "beautifully singular" and "ungeneralizable" lives of individual people (2). Byrd might describe the problem that ethnographers face as one of relating the general to the particular in time and place against a background of recurrence and repetition. As men and women go about their daily lives and as students negotiate their way through institutions, researchers inevitably encounter the uniqueness of each individual case though they may not always represent that uniqueness. Byrd concluded simply that "there are no examples" (365). In terms more precise for this dissertation, it may be that the students in this study (like human subjects generally) *are* and *are not* examples at the same time. While each student is always autobiographically distinct, always irreducible in time and space, it is possible to examine individual experiences to decode something about the site in question, in this case, a non-elite college. Patterns do emerge from social scrutiny from which we can suggest what is

typical if not *stereotypical*; because we can extract patterns of experience, we can also discuss who or what is exemplary vis a vis these constructed patterns. However, whatever is decoded cannot fully address the specifics of each person who is part of the pattern.

Byrd, like Brandt and like Fine and Weis, is concerned that a researcher's constant self-reflection can turn into a kind of nihilism (278). Because truth is always defined rhetorically and in over-determined contexts, it is good to pay attention to his notion that the ethnographer's job is to mark the place "where theory disappears into the particular" (287). In other words, rather than come up with broad explanations of students' thoughts and actions, Byrd, like Buroway, suggested that we pay closer attention to the ways power and authority are manifested and resisted in the benign everyday and the extent to which students or other subordinates in any structure use relationships to their own advantage. For example, Andy was an informant in this study but he also used his relationship with me to learn how to get a better-paying job. From this perspective, Andy becomes less and more than an example. He is a unique person, a basic writer negotiating institutional and financial obstacles the best way he knows how. His efforts as an agent acting on his own behalf help me better understand how people develop active strategies to maneuver inside what appears to be the rigid or controlling scripts of institutions. Thus, I see LIU, like all similar units and sub-sectors of society, as both a product of and a maker of the global structure it belongs to; it is compatible with and constructed by the whole which it constructs, but it is not reducible to the whole. And the basic writers in this study exemplify a particular, mutually constructive relationship to the institution at the same time that they defy, on a daily basis, such simplifications.

V

As critical ethnographers resist easy conclusions about the general meaning of individual human experience, we must also address questions about the ultimate goals of our research. That means asking, what is good ethnography? But also, *what is ethnography good for?* To conclude this chapter, then, I will discuss critical ethnography's identification of the researcher as change-agent. In *Power, Politics and Culture*, Edward Said stated the position of the critical ethnographer perhaps most succinctly: "Re-engagement with the intellectual process means a return to an old-fashioned, literary, and above all, intellectual scholarship based on the premise that human beings make their own history. And just as things are made, they can be unmade and remade" (366). The claim that critical ethnography, like Freirean critical pedagogy, can be a transformative tool is an argument I examined earlier in this chapter. As my interviews with the students in this study show, there is considerable potential in institutional settings to mentor ethnographic participants by providing insider knowledge about institutions and workplaces. This does not mean posing as a revealer who unveils to non-elite students their own subordination, which many of them already perceive. They, of course, know more than anyone about the struggles they face as working-class and first-generation students in a non-selective, high-tuition college. I also want to emphasize that developing a mutually beneficial mentoring relationship with students is not the same as collaborating with them. As much as I tried to ensure that students' willingness to participate in this research would benefit them in some way, I am, in the end, the only author of this dissertation and without doubt the greatest beneficiary. Like Heath and Fine and Weis, I want to start from a point of learning about these students' observations and views of themselves

not because I expect to completely understand them, but rather to represent their complex experiences and maneuvers as human subjects in formation.

As Bruce Horner argues in the *Ethnography Unbound* intended for compositionists, ethnographic work is just that: work. It is a kind of labor whose use-value is determined by the specific setting in which the research is carried out as well as by the disciplinary conventions that dictate how the research will be written, published, and read ("Critical" 14). In other words, like critical pedagogues who discuss institutional barriers to critical practice (Miller "The Arts"; Thelin), critical ethnographers acknowledge that everything from the discursive conventions of the discipline to material limitations on critical research and teaching limit the transformative potential of ethnography.

Furthermore, as my experiences with these four students suggest, the power dynamics between researcher and participant, too nuanced to be fully captured in theory, are better represented in narrative. Such nuances are part of a researcher's "state of unknowing" that I described in "Chapter Two." Critical ethnographers, then, like all researchers, work within and against limits, but perhaps unlike most researchers, are obliged to acknowledge limitations while simultaneously affirming rich reports of students' experiences that place subjects in their local and larger contexts. That is why critical ethnographers in both Sociology and Composition foreground the dialogic relationship between the macro and micro worlds of human experience. Compositionists Robert Brooke and Charlotte Hogg call this political commitment "dialogic activism":

> [W]e have to imagine a new project, a new role, out of which we speak together with our participants as more or less equals, even if we are the ones doing the actual writing. And this is a very different project than that of traditional

> ethnography, where at the moment of writing the researcher really is 'representing' those that were studied. (124)

As ethnographers in both Composition and Sociology propose, we start at a crucial place, the local, listening to the people whose lives we study while maintaining a healthy vigilance about how our own motives and goals influence how we tell others' stories.

Chapter Seven

'Impossible Research': Critical Ethnography and Informed Advocacy in Higher Education

The life stories of these four students–Carl, Michelle, Elizabeth, and Andy—continue, of course. As of spring 2009, all except Andy had graduated LIU. I lost touch with Carl after our final meeting so I do not know how he fared during the 2008-09 recession when hundreds of finance industry employees lost their jobs. Elizabeth, who graduated with a B.A. in English in 2009, is planning to stay at LIU, a place she has come to love, and enroll as a graduate MFA student, the same program that sponsored the poetry readings that touched her so deeply. Andy is still enrolled at LIU where he has changed his major back to Nursing, a degree he hopes to complete in 2012. He lives in the basement of his parents' house and still busses tables at the French restaurant in the SoHo neighborhood of New York. As of 2009, Michelle had also returned to LIU to pursue a graduate degree in Social Work in the hope that she will finally be able to find a job in her field. She lives in the Bronx with her boyfriend and their daughter, born in 2008, and is expecting a second child in early 2010. For the students profiled here, as with non-elite students generally, completing college, or merely staying enrolled, is a major achievement. In part, the project of this dissertation has been to illustrate the social, discursive, and academic contexts in which such students seek costly college credentials even though those credentials may not provide the kinds of capital needed to move them up into middle-class professions.

Carl showed that such mobility is reachable under certain circumstances. His rise from basic writer to valedictorian to corporate intern indicated that progressing "from the ghetto to Wall Street" can happen to some. As I described in "Chapter Two," the special

conditions for Carl's success are not a model for mass advancement because no broad social policy exists to invest in the general success of non-elite students the way one Wall Street firm invested singularly in Carl. Carl's path is a narrow one, despite the heady rhetoric of his Commencement address. In fact, too few high-paying jobs are available to reward a mass of high-achieving graduates and too few professional educators have working conditions and training for the intensive mentoring that was a crucial component to Carl's and Elizabeth's successes. Because no such egalitarian policies or infrastructure exist, the bootstraps narrative becomes an official "discourse of truth," as Foucault's termed it, for circulating and maintaining the status quo (*Power* 93). A 2008 report by the Brookings Institute, "Getting Ahead or Losing Ground," showed that, despite claims that education moves low-income and working-class families into the middle class, class status at birth still largely determines one's eventual social and economic position. Mass higher education at places like LIU cannot alter the social class landscape for most low-income families. While some poor children who earn college degrees do remarkably better than their parents, lateral or even downward mobility is still a seemingly intractable feature of working- and middle-class life. This is especially true for blacks. "[A] majority of black children born to middle-class parents grew to have lower incomes," the report showed. "[And] nearly half of middle-class black children fell into the bottom fifth in adulthood, compared with 16% percent of white children" (Eckholm "Higher").

Annette Lareau put it this way in her ethnography *Unequal Childhoods*: "[An] individual's social position is not the result of personal attributes such as effort or intelligence. . . . Rather, cultural training in the home is awarded unequal value in dominant institutions" (276). In other words, children from different communities inherit differently-

valued forms of capital in their homes and neighborhoods. Lareau posed class status not as a measure of personal merit, but rather as a largely transferred legacy. Long before attending high-status campuses whose college degrees count most in the job market, middle-class and affluent children learn, Lareau wrote, "that institutions should be responsive to them and . . . accommodate their individual needs" (245). In contrast, working-class children often learn from their parents that institutions can be bewildering. A few years before Lareau's work, Jean Anyon ("Social Class") proposed the widely-discussed thesis of "the hidden curriculum." This research suggested that children encounter curricula in school that orients them towards assuming their parents' social class positions when they grow up. In *Radical Possibilities*, Anyon later confirmed the role of social class on children's development in her discussion of the impact of poverty on cognition. "Longitudinal studies," Anyon wrote, "demonstrate that family income consistently predicts children's academic and cognitive performance, even when other family characteristics are taken into account" (65).

At the Commencement ceremony that began this study, both Carl and Parsons were compelling speakers as living examples who validated the official story of upward mobility. In Carl's case, it would be hard to imagine a more ideal candidate for such success: mastering institutional protocols, gaining connections, excelling in academics, being irreproachable in manners, etc. Carl's talent for adapting to unfamiliar cultural demands emerged in high school where two teacher-mentors drew him forward into a high-achieving life plan. Carl came to LIU with unusual prior investment in his adolescent development.

Once identified as an exemplar, Carl had great success in avoiding potentially distracting or disabling conflicts between habitus of origin and habitus of mobility. Such conflicts between working-class and middle-class sensibilities have been recorded in well-

known literacy narratives by Mike Rose (*Lives*), Frank McCourt, Linda Brodkey, and Richard Rodriguez, among others. Mobile working-class students need to accumulate capital of high distinction that their families and communities of origin cannot provide. Yet, the child-raising practices of working-class parents are not exactly the problem. If such parents try to raise their children with the cultural practices favored by affluent parents, even if they could afford it, it would lead to ironic outcomes. "Any effort to spread an elite practice to all members of society," Lareau concluded, "would result in that practice being devalued and replaced by a different sorting mechanism" (277). Since there is limited room at the top, access to elite credentials must also be limited; if widely distributed, such credentials simply lose their job-market clout, as did the high school diploma when it became widely-available in the mid-twentieth century. Too many graduates with too many qualifying credentials undermine an occupational system of limited rewards. Put another way, any distinction possessed en masse by definition loses its distinction, which is why Carl's achievements are indeed distinctive, because so few of his peers gain them.

Mass access to higher education, as part of a larger process of social reproduction characterized by a weak labor market and low wages for workers, actually functions to limit upward mobility. In this arrangement, non-elite colleges like LIU become what Lareau called a "sorting process" (248), echoing Joel Spring's metaphor of college as "a sorting machine"(1976). Further, David Lavin and his co-authors, in *Right vs. Privilege*, a study of Open Admissions at CUNY, which I mentioned earlier, identified community colleges as non-elite sites that "constitute a social buffer" to advancement (201). This formulation was repeated the following year by Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer in their study *The American Community College*. Like community colleges, low-budget, four-year colleges

with high costs and high drop-out rates also serve as "social buffers." Educational researcher Kevin Carey wrote that "a great many students are entering urban universities and never completing a degree . . . And in most cases the numbers for black and Latino students are particularly bad." Carey listed seven major urban colleges with six-year graduation rates under fifty percent. Access without success is not an instrument of equality.

In this regard, community college reporter Wick Sloane has written of working-class student life in an unusual residence he took up for a year at a Boston area two-year campus, Bunker Hill. Sloane painfully documented how such higher education does not offer 'the best years of your life' as college mythology proposes. Bunker Hill students are commuters who live off-campus and often work for low wages, so they have no respite from the demands of the labor market while in school. As Sloane reported, students at Bunker Hill take their fear, stress and economic anxiety into overcrowded classes taught mostly by underpaid, part-time teachers. Of the majority of students who don't complete college at Bunker Hill, Sloane summarized the situation in rather dramatic terms:

> Those [students] are the living deaths, perpetuated by the economy, of the millions of bright and motivated human beings who don't survive the obstacle course, the minefield, the live-fire field that we, the people, tolerate today as an education system for the poor. ("The Problem")

Sloane suggested that Bunker Hill, and colleges like it, are simply not good options for most poor and working-class students, a position much at odds with the official designation of two-year colleges as "democracy's open door" (Griffith).

Perhaps this situation will improve in coming decades, but in 2006 The Education Trust released a report anticipating Sloane's observations. About the wide differences between elite

and non-elite colleges, the report showed that public, four-year colleges are turning away more and more low-income students and increasing financial support to middle- and upper-class students. "The number of students who received institutional grant aid and came from families earning more than $100,000 per year increased from 32,000 in 1995-96 to 119,000 in 2003-04," an increase of 406 percent. "During the same time period," the report continued, "the number of institutional grant aid recipients from families earning less than $20,000 decreased from 118,000 to 89,000" ("Engines" 19). Financial aid shifted by public institutions to affluent students makes it more difficult for working-class students to compete for funds. These statistics were confirmed in the *New York Times* which reported in 2009 that "institutions that have pledged to admit students regardless of need are finding ways to increase the number of those who pay full fare in ways that allow the college to maintain the claim of being need-blind . . ." (Zernike). Tax-levy funds for public higher education thus represent a wealth transfer because overly-taxed working-class families whose children are less likely to attend college subsidize the costs of educating affluent children who are more likely to enter college. The Education Trust study authors sum up these findings by asserting that "[public] institutions have turned away from their historic roles as engines of opportunity for talented young people of all races and economic backgrounds" ("Engines" 21). The fact that college costs are rising and public colleges are enrolling fewer low-income students is especially troubling because data gathered from students themselves paints a very different picture than the one Parsons and Carl offered at Commencement. According to a study by Public Agenda, for example, students do not drop out of college because they are bored or find the work too difficult. Instead, the students in the study cited economic factors, including the need to work while they are in school, as the number one reason they left

college without completing degrees ("With Their" 5-6). Certainly, financial factors were high on the list of concerns for Andy and Michelle. Unlike Carl, they did not have scholarship aid and, unlike Elizabeth, they were more concerned about their job prospects after graduation than with the symbolic rewards of participating in the literary culture of higher education.

II

By embedding individual stories in larger systems, this dissertation addresses some key methodological issues such as the positionality of the researcher and the relationship between narrative and analytic representations. Regarding the role of the researcher, it is important to keep in mind that writing 'other' lives requires coming to terms with the fact that the texts researchers produce will always be partially about ourselves. H.L. Goodall, for example, asserted that "all representations are partial depictions of reality" (54). Such partiality is inevitable because stories always reveal the interests of the teller as well as contradictory elements and possible ruses in the research subject. Renditions of human experience, then, are shaped and limited by our own ways of making meaning. Julie Lindquist, who studied the language and persuasive practices of regulars in a working-class bar, also argued that the researcher is never merely relaying others' stories. "Whatever else it takes as its subject," Lindquist wrote, "an ethnography cannot help but be 'about' the ethnographer herself" (*A Place* 11). These orientations propose, then, that when I assess the material of this study I must also assess the lenses through which I look. It is only from this *place of knowing and knowing*, which simultaneously interrogates the gazer and the gazed, that one can defend any conclusions that might be drawn from ethnographic research.

To discuss such conclusions, I will first go back to the beginning, to what motivated me to embark on this project. As a former writing instructor and writing center administrator at LIU, I began this dissertation as a way to understand what was happening to students who enrolled in a non-selective college and borrowed large sums to earn a low-status degree even when the odds were poor that they would actually graduate. Why would they take such a risk? Why would a humane institution let them? LIU, like countless institutions of mass higher education, represents itself to students as a pathway to success, which is a public relations strategy essential for any institution's enrollment/revenue flow. None of the students featured in this dissertation expressed any awareness of LIU's low graduation rate. The pervasive institutional silence on their dismaying prospects and debt loads suggests that the happy, hopeful bootstraps narrative displaces other stories about college and post-college life for these students.

Before this research, I already understood, of course, that such non-traditional students often face academic barriers as well. They worked long hours outside school for low wages, often spent precious hours caring for children or other family members instead of studying, often lacked an academic support network, and often suffered from inadequate academic preparation for college thanks to the schools they had previously attended. Conducting this research allowed me to use the tools of scholarship to reveal the connections between some widely-shared material conditions, true enough as they are, and some broad structural relationships that generate and inform them. This study is a way of *concretely* seeing how generic social conditions sediment individual biographies while allowing me to imagine my own relationship to and participation in those processes. By putting my own motives and performances into the picture, I open up a space to explore the concrete terms in

which research is shaped by the researcher. In other words, in a self-reflective research process, the students I construct in this study simultaneously construct me. In that sense I may have seen their trajectories through higher education and into the world of work through the prism of my own experience and expectations, further complicating my view of their situations.

My paternal grandfather made his living as a carpenter, working in summer's blistering heat and winter's bitter cold installing tile roofs on houses in our rural town so he could send his children to college, a story of one generation sacrificing so that the next can stand on its shoulders, played out here in Andy's narrative especially. My own father was able to earn a teaching certificate after service in Korea during the Vietnam War thanks to tuition assistance from the GI Bill, a public entitlement of enormous consequence to the million or more veterans who went to college in the decades after the World War II. No such public entitlement financed the aspirations of LIU students, though Carl did receive a handsome private entitlement available to a few. Surely, without the original sacrifices of my laboring grandparents and without the tax-supported veterans' entitlement that sent a whole generation of mostly white, male GIs to college, I would not be where I am today, close to earning a PhD, a prospect that dad or grandpa could never have imagined. In my case, education was a large part of the equation that created the conditions through which my family eventually entered the middle class. Today, both my mother and father are retired teachers and my grandparents' grandchildren have all had the opportunity, if not the desire, to attend college. The fact that the link between education and upward mobility is bound up in my own biography helps explain my high expectations for the students in this study. Further, of course, my own family history of successful intergenerational mobility makes me critical

of bootstrap-willpower narratives that represent success as an individualist path upward. My own family story can be hijacked to showcase higher education as "democracy's open door" but, for immigrants and working-class people of color, the power of education to lift up families is a frayed and fraying thread, disconnected from the privileged position in the labor market which my skilled white grandpa enjoyed and which my educated white parents also deployed. On the one hand, then, I am indeed a product of the dominant bootstraps-willpower narrative (though not of its individualist variety) while, on the other hand, my story is inapplicable to the material conditions of the urban students and their dark-skinned families at LIU. The apparent analogy of these two actually disparate upward narratives means that I was socially constructed with higher expectations, authority, and options than the subjects of this study. Thus, an obvious slippage between my family's story and these students' experiences affects this research and makes this project a self-critical responsibility for me. Another way to put the relationship between me and the students in this study is that my work chronicling their struggles and their progress brought my own story into sharper relief at the same time that it brought the end of my journey as a novice researcher into view.

The intersection of lives and of life's work has prompted scholars to question the role of empathy in qualitative research. Certainly, for example, my initial reading of Carl's experiences as evidence that he had "bought in" to a destructive ideology of American individualism was at least partly a result of my own empathy for him and for the other students in this study. I wanted Carl and the other students to bring to their own experiences the same critical authority that I inherited from my particular social location, which was not theirs, of course. In a word, I didn't want them to misunderstand their own circumstances or their own chances for upward mobility. In "Chapter Two," I discussed how my expectations

in that regard were unrealistic and even dangerous. Cate Watson wrote that researchers may, of course, empathize with participants. Yet, drawing on Joost van Loon's notion that empathy is an "impossible vanity," Watson warned that researcher empathy "project[s] all our own understandings onto the unsuspecting other and in the process clos[es] down research" (114). While empathy is an unsurprising response to qualitative research, it should not take the place of analysis and should always be subjected to vigorous scrutiny. Sondra Perl and her colleagues describe storytelling as a way for researchers to "strike a balance between narrative and analysis, to discover the right voice(s) to convey the experience of others along with their own . . ." ("Storyelling" 308). Theorizing broadly and narrating singularly are both necessary for seeing and rethinking commonplace assumptions about the relationship between education and upward mobility.

The personal, as my own story shows, is often more than personal and narratives of individual experiences point to larger, widely-shared histories and problems. Theory can chart the intersection of biography, history, and social structure. And narrative allows individual voices to be heard amidst the clamor of macro-processes that shape all our lives. Each of the stories I tell about the students in this dissertation–from Carl's 'willpower' speech to Andy's deep disillusionment and from Elizabeth's hero-teacher narrative to Michelle's post-graduation debt anxiety–serve as examples of more general problems and structural inequities that many non-elite students face in college and beyond. Yet, as Amy Shuman wrote, "[t]he more a story represents a generalized, shared, or even quintessentially human experience, the higher the stakes in asserting or challenging its legitimacy" (149). In other words, the moment Carl's story began to lend itself to the larger, collective meaning I had in mind for it was also the moment I needed to take a step back and question how that story

acquired such significance. This is the value of Michael Buroway's concept of the *anomaly*, which I discussed in the previous chapter. By discovering anomalies—contradictions between theory and the everyday experiences of ethnographic participants–researchers can illuminate how the singular struggles of individuals both are and are not examples of larger claims. For example, as I described in "Chapter Two," my initial reading of Carl's post-college interview was an attempt to his fit his experience into my own pre-defined categories. Truthfully, it may be impossible for me to coax out of Carl his own explanation for why he defends his employer in the face of a crushing workload in a tiresome corporate treadmill. The anomaly in our final interview is my realization that I could not explain the ultimate meaning of Carl's post-college assertions because his agency as an actor and strategist in his own life defies my own expectations of what is good and what is possible, to use Therborn's scheme in *Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*. In assuming I know more than Carl does about his circumstances, I risked putting my own expectations and perceptions above his own, rather than setting them side-by-side as disparate discourses dependent on different social formation of subjects.

As sociologist Martyn Hammersley wrote, "the essence of ethnography is the tension between trying to understand people's perspectives from the inside while also viewing them and their behavior more distantly, in ways that may be alien (and perhaps even objectionable) to them" (11). Just as ethnographic participants have the right to describe their experiences however they choose, researchers are obligated to view those experiences and narratives against a backdrop of theory and history. This obligation to analysis comes with a caveat: researchers must also view their own perspectives with distance and scrutiny. Thus, case study research entails a kind of double helix in which the researcher moves in two directions

at once, gathering insider data while still viewing such data through the lenses of scholarship and self-reflexivity. As Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street explained, "[e]thnographic work is dialogic between existing explanations and judgments (whether held by scholars, outsiders, or insiders) and ongoing data collections and analysis" (*Ethnography* 57). In that regard, the researcher is both an insider and an outsider.

I began to come to terms with my own insider-outsider status as I rethought my initial assumptions about Carl. While I realized I could never completely draw out satisfying critical explanations from him, it took me a great deal of time, reading, and reflection (all luxuries in any research paradigm) to grasp the significance of that fact. Cate Watson, in her essay on the dangers of projecting our goals and ideas onto participants, wrote that ethnographic work depends on gathering and composing narratives that always contain an element of fiction. The methods I employed in this dissertation, for example, allowed me to illuminate the discourses that prop up myths about the power of individual will and ingenuity in the face of structural impediments; they do not necessarily authorize me to say anything definitive or summative about these students' lives. What I can propose is that Carl and Elizabeth, the two "winners" in this dissertation, are political assets for the status quo which indeed has used and rewarded them as such. Though they are specific individuals who cannot be reduced to their exemplar status, they also publicly embody the discourses of fairness and opportunity that sustain the myths of bootstrapping individualism in a world of boundless opportunity.

Despite the fact that I see bootstrapping individualism, as well as "cooling-out" and "bait and switch," as deceptive rhetorics that rationalize the world for low-income and working-class students in pursuit of low-status degrees that may not benefit them, none of these subjects–not Andy, Elizabeth, Michelle, or Carl–expressed their situations in those

terms. Even Andy, who did harbor a critique of the institution, saw no alternative to forging ahead in the hope that somehow things would work out for him and he would prove himself worthy of his parents' sacrifices. Part of moving past empathy as a research goal or strategy requires studying students' observations, experiences, and perceptions to develop research programs that investigate how individuals are connected to the world they inhabit. Such a move does not require erasing the role of emotion in either an individual student's desire to make his parents proud or in a researcher's investment in the lives of the students she studies. In fact, one question this dissertation raises is how non-selective institutions engage in what Lindquist called the "emotional management" of students who have few other options but to attend a low-status college at any cost ("Class" 197). Certainly, promoting mass enrollment in college as the means to overcome any obstacle is an ideology that keeps a disgruntled cohort off the unsupervised streets, inside a school or, what Foucault called, "an apparatus of uninterrupted examination" that rationalizes power relations by conflating access with fairness and equality (*Discipline* 186).

For the most part, the students in this study saw their missions as completely self-selected and individual in a predictable world built on 'the social contract' of the bootstraps story, that is, you work hard, you persevere, you play by the rules, and the system will reward you with a good job and decent way of life. In this scheme, success would prove these students' mettle while failure probably meant they weren't working hard enough. In *The Diverted Dream*, Brint and Karabel argued that the unique and highly-stratified structure of higher education in the US fosters such a lack of class-consciousness or sense of a "common fate" among Americans–the idea that we're all the same and all in the same boat (223). In the US, for example, it is possible for some students like Carl who come from working-class

backgrounds, to attend college and come out the other side in a higher tax bracket with little or no debt. It is possible for a student like Elizabeth to return to college in her late forties to earn self-respect and a sense of accomplishment, the classic American second chance. It is also possible for students like Andy and Michelle to take time off from school, to fail classes, and to come back and try again and again. For college students in the US, there are second and third chances on a path filled with dropping-out, stopping-out, and remarkably low graduation rates. This open access to some form of higher education, embedded in a discourse of opportunities, fosters the individualism Carl and Parsons spoke about at graduation. Such access, buoyed by lofty rhetoric of success, actually contributes to the transmission of inequality across generations. In fact, according to Brint and Karabel, it is precisely the "apparent openness of the system" that fosters individualism and careerism over political struggle (224). One instrument for circulating such individualized imaginations is a success story like Carl's, represented as exemplary when it is exceptional.

Commencement, then, is a dominant ritual that undermines Mills' "sociological imagination." As Hector Raul Solis-Gadea wrote, "the very act of defining the problems of the epoch is in itself an exercise of the sociological imagination, as is the a priori identification of ways that concrete human beings might establish agency or participation in the treatment of social problems or their solutions" (118). In other words, a key component of critical ethnography, like Freirian critical pedagogy, is that it be action-oriented in connecting the local and the global. Identifying bootstrapping or "cooling-out" as operative rhetorics in non-elite colleges provides a foundation for questioning the dominant discourses while proposing an alternative egalitarian discourse against unequal higher education. As Stephen Gilbert Brown wrote, the goals of a new, critical ethnography

> have shifted from career-oriented pursuit of knowledge about the Other to fostering political agency with the Other. . . . Knowledge, instead of being an end in itself, is now the means to a political end; instead of solely serving the interests of the ethnographer, it now serves the needs and interests of the participant. ("Beyond" 306)

Using critical ethnography to forge alliances with participants is a worthy goal, of course. Yet, how might that take shape? Graduate student researchers operate in normative academic institutions where they are expected to be canonical and career-oriented in a tight academic job market. In addition, some students may simply be uninterested in forming such an alliance. Making decisions about how to represent others is a fact of qualitative research, but being able to foster political agency with them is another thing entirely. As Bruce Horner wrote, expectations that ethnographers should assist and collaborate with participants and even co-write with them "gloss over the labor involved in such work and the material positionings of those called to take it up" ("Critical" 24). It is important to move away from expectations that ethnography can or should empower anyone on its own, offer clear solutions to the problems it helps describe, or be ideology-free. Instead, it is best to understand qualitative research as a method of critical inquiry and as a textual strategy. As critical inquiry, ethnography is a way to uncover the problems that require our attention and effort. As a textual strategy, ethnography allows researchers to emphasize individual and group narratives, not because they reveal hidden truths, but because, through composing and analyzing narratives, we are reminded that the stories we tell illustrate patterns and typologies at the same time that they defy easy interpretations. According to Amy Shuman, "[w]e do best to understand narrative as always unmasking the claims (of authenticity, coherence, resistance, ownership, empathy, etc) made for it" (153). To Shuman's claim, I

would add that we do best to understand narrative as potentially unmasking the power relations that limit an ethnographer's ability to intervene on students' behalf or to collaborate with them on research and writing. After all, many scholars themselves occupy vulnerable institutional or professional positions that make it difficult at best to take concrete actions to address problems of non-elite students. In other words, ethnographic study, which is so often about dispossessed 'others,' may remind some researchers what they have in common with dominated populations.

Critical ethnography could, instead, become part of a larger program of intellectual engagement with and *informed advocacy* on behalf of participants. In this way, ethnography collapses the distinction between theory and practice that has long been debated in our field. Theoretically grounded, case study research that relates individual conditions to structural patterns and processes can result in many forms of advocacy including mentoring individual students, developing course materials which question the truth claims of official discourses in higher education, and supporting equitable educational policies in local sites where we live and work. As Kory Lawson Ching pointed out in her essay on the theory-practice divide in Composition, "theoretical discourse does not drive practice; it is practice" (463). Yet, such concrete advocacy programs also take time, resources, and collegial support to avoid falling into isolated institutional irrelevance. Not surprisingly, such resources are simply not available to many graduate students, junior faculty, or the part-time and non-tenure-track teachers that now make up the majority of instructors in colleges and universities.[23] Informed advocacy, then, is a long-term project that does not depend only on concrete proposals or on

[23] "Education in the Balance: A Report on the Academic Workforce in English." *Modern Language Association*. 10 Dec 2008. Web.

clear links between scholarship and pedagogical or professional activities. Instead, it allows critical ethnographers to cultivate what might be called habits of mind, broad orientations toward life and work in which we endeavor, even in the most limiting situations, to put the needs of participants on par with our own. By researching how deceptive discourses operate in one non-selective institution, for example, I state my opposition to the power relations that subordinate non-elite students, articulate a reasoned position in regard to a consequential policy dilemma in a key social arena, and enunciate my allegiance with those poorly served by mass education. In this way, we can offer students more than just a long shot at upward mobility as individual strivers. Instead, research and teaching can become sites through which we encourage students to develop their own "sociological imagination," or what Joseph Harris called a "critical sense of belonging to [a] class" (48). In this paradigm, I seek not only to be a researcher informed to speak on behalf of student needs; I am also a listener, someone for whom scholarly inquiry involves the practices of listening to others while simultaneously circulating their stories to larger venues. That is, this research enables me to position my work in alliance with the under-served though I am not like them and can no more claim objective knowledge than I can claim the ability to change their circumstances. Such limitations, what Watson called the "impossibility of research," are not impediments to writing 'other' lives; they are its essence (115). Like the place of knowing and unknowing, the impossibility of completely understanding and fully representing another's anxiety, pain, or joy is exactly the site where case study research, and the articulation of egalitarian discourses in higher education, begins.

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