Trajectories
The Social and Educational Mobility of Education Scholars From Poor and Working Class Backgrounds

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Trajectories: The Educational and Social Mobility of Educators from the Poor and Working Class, is a collection of mobility narratives of critical scholars in education from poor and working-class backgrounds.

While Americans have long held deep-seated cultural beliefs in the capacity of schooling to level unequal playing fields, there has been little research on the psycho-social processes of social and educational mobility in the United States. Rising Up employs narrative research methodologies to interrogate the experiences of class border-crossing via success in school.

This volume addresses two discourses within education: First, the experiences of those who have crossed class boundaries contribute to a deeper understanding of how social class functions in the United States. The narratives compiled in this volume explore class within the lives of young people on the margins, as identities, ambition and achievement are constructed and negotiated in school.

More specifically, the volume suggests new directions for policy and practice to counteract classism in schools and in the broader culture. As they write of the constraints that they circumvented to succeed against the odds, these authors complicate notions of opportunity as the inevitable reward for high achievement. As they write of agency and tenacity, they will illuminate cultural strengths that likely were invisible to teachers and peers. As critical scholars of education, the contributors to this volume speak specifically to ways in which teacher education can and should address issues of class.
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CREDITS

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The emails all began in a similar way: “I’m working on my chapter, but it’s going to be late. This is the hardest thing that I’ve written in a long time”. The authors of the chapters compiled in this book are all highly educated academics. Some are just now launching promising careers in higher education; others are well established in their fields. All write and teach critically about the institution of public schooling. All know the literature, know how to teach about educational inequality, know intellectually that schools have never systematically served poor and working class children well.

And distinctively, each of these authors is the child of poor or working class parents, and ironically, school did, at some level, work for us. In this book, we explore the tensions inherent in living as the exception to much of what we teach, of succeeding against the odds. Our lives and our schooling have been deeply etched by our class backgrounds, yet in all of our years of formal education, we have been essentially silent about our complicated journeys across class borders. Few of us have spoken publicly before about how we reconcile our clear understanding of schools as places that sort children into unequal futures with our lived experiences of moving into the middle class in large measure because of our success in school.

And thus we wrote and rewrote these narratives of mobility. Intellect and extensive knowledge of the literature could take us only so far. These were, indeed, difficult chapters to write.

And it shouldn’t be so.

If we accept popular rhetoric that public education in North America can open opportunities and level playing fields, then stories of educational mobility should be straightforward, uplifting, and clean. They should also be fairly common, if not in the literature, at least in the informal parlance of the profession. They would certainly be stories that these authors would have shared, or would have been elicited more often. But the narratives compiled in this volume are far more complicated.

As we wrote, it was also clear that our critical studies of schooling couldn’t adequately explain our lives. There were gaps in the literatures in which we are
immersed that have rendered our teachers, our tangled ambitions, our families, our geographies and – most significantly – our own agency invisible.

We’ve written this book, then, because in our field of education, we know surprisingly little about the processes by which some poor and working-class students find their way into the middle class (Fine and Burns, 2003). While conservative policy makers celebrate stories of mobility as evidence that the system “works,” and liberal policy makers uphold them as justification for their policy manipulations of public education critical scholars have generally ignored these stories altogether. We lack, as Mike Rose (1995, p. 429) observes, “complex models of schools as institutions in which limiting and liberating forces contend”. Scholars and students have access to a strong body of work on the myriad ways in which schools constrain the lives of young people on the margins of society. We have a much more superficial understanding of how some students come to navigate and circumvent those constraints.

We initiated this project in the hope of generating much more conversation about social class and educational mobility in North America. As Renny Christopher (2004) has written, class is essentially invisible in our culture until one is poised at the very threshold of crossing class boundaries. The authors of these chapters are among the few individuals who have stood at that threshold and thus possess a distinctive “dual consciousness” about social class and about the complex processes by which class boundaries are straddled if not crossed.

As we narrate these stories of “success” the authors interrogate the social, economic and educational constraints that they faced in spite of their academic achievements. We have succeeded against the odds, but these are hardly stories of inherent reward for native talent and hard work. Instead, the authors write of unsettling encounters with class privilege, of teetering on the edges of economic precariousness, of the invisibility of families like ours in academic and popular discourse, and of deep class stratification within U.S. schools. As poor and working-class children living now as middle-class adults, these authors are distinctly positioned to disrupt the silence about class that pervades American public discourse (hooks, 2000).

CLASS AS LIVED EXPERIENCE.

As Reay (2005, p. 912) notes, class consciousness has conventionally been seen within sociology as little more than as a “politicized awareness of … social positioning”. However, scholars studying class at the intersections of race and gender (e.g.; Bettie, 2003; Lawler, 2004; Lutrell, 1997; Skeggs, 1997, 2005; Walkerdine, 2006) have also argued for the importance of studying class boundaries as they are constructed, embodied, and maintained within the dailiness of everyday social interactions. The narratives compiled here inform a deeper understanding of these psycho-social processes by which students traverse class borders through success in school.

There is, indeed a great deal to be learned about the lived experiences of class and class mobility as they intersect with schooling. What little we have known
about those who do cross class borders via their success in school (e.g. Lucey, Melody, and Walker dine, 2003; Muzatti and Samarco, 2006; Reay, 1997) affirms the experiences of the authors of these chapters, that becoming educated from the margins involves complicated and contested processes of identity formation.

As Lucey, Melody, and Walker dine (2003, p. 293) have written (and as these narratives so poignantly illustrate), mobility requires loss as well as gain, as individuals assume “hybrid” identities through which they police and navigate their disparate social worlds. In their words:

Discourses on social mobility and social capital tend to hold denials: of the losses that are fundamental to and unavoidable in change, even when those changes are desired; of the enormous amount of psychological work involved in transformation; and of the costs of that work.

This complicated identity work and the shame that it can engender (Lucey, et al.) are part of the “human costs of class mobility” of which bell hooks (2000, p. 156) writes. As Fine and Burns (2003, p. 850) observe, “So-called opportunities for mobility are rarely clean”.

As the authors of these chapters write of the constraints that they circumvented to succeed against the odds, they complicate notions of opportunity as the inevitable reward for high achievement. As they write of agency and tenacity, they illuminate cultural strengths that were in many cases invisible to teachers and peers. The authors analyze particular moments and experiences in their schooling in which “class [was] deeply embedded in everyday interactions, in institutional practices, in struggles over identity, validity, self-worth, and integrity” (Reay, 2005, p. 924), even while they may not, as children have been able to name such experiences as being rooted in class.

NARRATIVE AS INQUIRY

Narrative inquiry (e.g. Conle, 2003; Connelly and Clandedin 1999; Grumet, 1990, 1991; Lyons and La Boskey, 2002; Nash, 1990) provides a particularly salient methodology for exploring the processes of upward mobility through schooling. Those who succeed in school against the odds have long been defined on others’ terms: either as proof of the inherent fairness of the system or dismissed as mere tokens, who have been “allowed” to succeed so their others like them might be duped into believing in fairness. Socialized into middle-class way of being and knowing as a condition of their success, scholars from poor and working-class backgrounds have rarely had access to the social spaces within which they might speak for themselves, on their own terms. As Grumet (1991) notes, storytelling is at its heart a negotiation of power: the power to invoke aesthetic forms of telling that integrate feeling, action, and experience; and the power over definitions of meaning. She elaborates:

Autobiographical method invites us to struggle with all of those determinations. It is that struggle and its resolve to develop ourselves in ways that transcend the
identities that others have constructed for us that bonds the projects of autobiography and education. (Grumet, 1990, p. 324)

For the contributors to this volume, narrating our own story is, in the end, an act of constructing our own identity on our own terms (Connelly and Clandenin, 1999; Juzwik, 2006) after decades of socialization to the middle-class norms of formal schooling.

We invite readers to engage these narratives in the spirit in which they were written. As Muzzatti and Samarco (2006, p. 3) explain, narrative:

[...] allows readers to hear a voice, a first-person subject identifying with and claiming subjectivity while at the same time recognizing the social-structural forces that inform the personal. [...] To the marginalized, silence and immobilization have long been outcomes of educational systems. [...] Engagement with a narrative allows readers to feel the moment of truth opening up, the moment when, free from hegemonic academic boundaries, they are able to articulate their fugitive knowledges.

Together, the chapters compiled here represent fugitive knowledge that is very much still in the making and unmaking. These are unfinished stories of complicated class identities still under negotiation, trajectories launched long ago but still in search of safe places to alight.

REFERENCES


1. JAGGED EDGES

_A psychosocial exploration by one who “made it”_

A HIGH SCHOOLER

Peering sideways
breaking the slunch of my cocoon
I wait.
I watch.
At the bottom of the hill
leading to our trailer.
Smiling foolishly
I jump.
I enter.
Too fast as usual into the carload of kids.
Reddening face
Hoping they don’t notice or don’t care
I listen.
I look.
Riding through tree-lined streets
envying mansion-like homes and worldly talk.
I withdraw.
I suspect.
Diminishing trust, or hope for trust
sitting quiet in the slunch of a cocoon no longer mine
and still peering sideways.

A KINDERGARTENER

Merthiolate. The single memory I have from Kindergarten that can be conjured up at the most surprising moments is screaming at the top of my lungs on the corner across from my school as my mom held up my dress with one hand and dabbed bright orange merthiolate all over my skinned legs with the other. The sponge-like applicator that danced across my damaged limb came in a threatening dark brown bottle that promised – and delivered – an excruciating burn. I don’t remember where my brother was while I jumped around on my toes with my mom yelling at me to stand still and getting more frustrated by the minute. But I know that he was sitting next to me when we were still in the car. The story has been told many different ways and two go like this: 1) I was too excited and anxious about getting

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to school and I opened the door and fell out before the car stopped; 2) I was excited about getting to school and I unlocked the car then my brother opened it up and gave me a shove. Each version of the story has something about me being “excited” to get to school and both end with me holding onto the door for dear life as my mom slowed the car to a stop.

And then the merthiolate.

And the screaming.

My mom calmly walked me into my classroom that morning, my face tangled and wet, my legs missing skin and stained orange. She kissed me goodbye and left me standing there with wide eyes. I don’t know what happened between that time and when she later came back to get me. She has told me that her “nerves were shot” after I fell out of the car and she was just moving through the motions of the morning routine when suddenly it occurred to her that she left me at school skinless and silent. Jumping in her blue Pontiac LeMans and speeding back to Sharpsburg Elementary School in Norwood, Ohio, she signed me out and took me home.

Home was somewhere in Norwood I imagine – maybe with my great grandmother, Granny, who had the tallest bed with the softest feather ticking you’ve ever felt. We stayed with her some, I do remember that, but I’m not sure that we ever really lived there. Maybe home was the apartment on Montgomery Road where my grandmother recently told me she forced my mother to move out of when she visited one Saturday morning in the winter and the hallway floors were covered with ice and all of us were cold because the building didn’t have heat.

My mom was a single mother. I was four. John was two. She did everything she could to be independent including working two full-time jobs, living in ice-draped apartments, and dropping me off at school with orange-dyed legs and tear-swollen eyes. She probably had to go to work the morning I fell out of the car and the frustration grew as she thought about missing a day’s pay and what would have to be left unpaid as a result.

The year was 1976 and children had to be five years old before entering kindergarten unless they were able to pass a qualifying test to enter as a four-year-old. I was four until my birthday in October. I passed the test. Maybe because public school was cheaper than childcare, maybe because my mom thought I was anxious to get to school and that I was (naturally) brilliant, maybe because of a complex combination of these and other reasons. Anyway, I entered kindergarten at age four in a tiny building that was made especially for kindergarteners.

The child’s garden. Separate from the other children, separate playgrounds, separate entryways, separate hallways, separate principals.

Separate. Protected.

A place to grow into a person who might enter the institution of school and manage to climb up the social class ladder – the one missing rungs near the bottom – the one with oil-slopped rungs toward the middle – the one with prickly-thorned rungs on the top.
Glimpsing, feeling, touching, emoting class difference, class inferiority, from the inside out of adolescent social groups is filled with anxiety as I study the specimens around me in the unbearable Florida heat with intense curiosity. I focus on the words they use, their faces as they speak, the way they wear their hair, the clothes on their bodies, how their bodies move, how they greet one another, how they look at me, how they look at each other. I am an ethnographer attempting to piece together some knowledge of this foreign landscape in which I find myself, fitting no better than an overgrown pumpkin in a vineyard, and yet my existence is at least as obvious to each of the refined beings around me. I am not critical in the sense of seeing societal structures that afford class stratification and class discrimination, but critical in the sense of finding fault in myself, in my mother, in my siblings, in my home, in my upbringing, in my education, in me and those before me. I am not, therefore, intellectually positioned to produce multiple readings of the social and political nightmare unfolding in front of me, within me, but instead I ache to change, to become like them, to talk like them, move my body like them, live like them, to transform myself by any means necessary into them. And that means leaving me and anyone like me in the shadows.

In these suspended moments of inquiry and intense study the gym teacher yells for us to begin our laps around the baseball diamond and I do as I’m told. Brown dust rolls behind me as I jog down the third base line alongside the school parking lot and a sudden pressure on the top of my head stops me in my tracks.

“What was that?” I mouth to no one in particular since no one is paying attention to me anyway.

Right hand instinctively moves to the source of wonder.
Hair.
Wetness.
Goop.
Eyes and mouth open wide.
“Oh my God!”

Great. Just great. Could this possibly get any worse?!

Seagulls fly overhead belting out their cries, and, apparently, dropping off their shit along the way. Lucky me, I saved one white and black mess from soiling the baseball diamond.

How, may I ask, is it that a flock of seagulls flies over a group of kids who get taken to school in the mornings by parents driving shiny Jaguars, Mercedes, BMWs, Bentleys, and Porsches, and the only student who gets shit on is the new girl whose family just moved their 1974 Volkswagen Beetle across four state lines inside the back of a U-Haul truck along with their mattresses, underwear, and pots and pans?

How could it be that the overly self-conscious, feeling somehow cheated, humiliated girl with bird shit in her hair experiences such injustices in the world while the others continue to run obliviously around the bases?

Life sucks.

At least at school.
AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLER

Renee, my best friend in the fifth and sixth grades wasn’t allowed to play at my house, a different trailer than that depicted earlier, but one that was situated in the back of a park in rural Ohio. I went to her house all the time. Don’t think she ever stepped inside mine. She was never able to see that my home was impeccably clean and organized – my mother has always been a bit of a neat freak – but instead we lived our friendship and she imagined the inside of my home in her own way. This imagined state of my living was likely informed by her mother’s perception of how trailer park people must live, the very perception that kept her from allowing her youngest daughter to play inside my house.

Three important things I learned in school:
1. Money matters.
2. Status goods matter.

I didn’t learn in school that race mattered, at least not really. I knew that my family teased me about my “Black boyfriends” referring to my first crush in kindergarten and another in fourth grade. I didn’t want to date the guy in my chemistry class who kept asking me out, but I was attracted to other guys in my school who were Black. Either way, I knew that it would make a difference to someone in my family or in my peer group if I dated a Black guy, but I didn’t learn that my race mattered for a very long time. I figured that out much later in life, and I continue to understand that the most salient piece of one’s identity within a particular context is what we learn about most quickly. For me, it has almost always been class, followed distantly by the complexities of gender, race, sexuality, and religion depending on where I was and who I was with. For others, it depends.

Tameka, my daughter’s friend in kindergarten, was coming home with us one day after school when she said to me, “You are both White and I am Black.”

I looked at her and said, “Hmmm. What do you think about that?”

Thoughtfully and in a matter-of-fact tone she responded, “I think it matters.” Then she ended the conversation, smiled, and began skipping with my daughter down the hallway.

And so goes one of five-year-old Tameka’s lessons from and perhaps about school, and thus the extended tentacles out to society: race matters.

But in an all-White classroom in the fourth grade, it was my class status that crippled me, made me tremble, flushed my face. I walked quietly and self-consciously across the white tiled floor and past the rows of desks to the shelf where the SRA box was waiting. Slide one card in, pull another out. No one else was moving, only a couple people looked up from their seats. I was fast at this SRA stuff. I knew it and they knew it too. But I hated walking in front of everyone thinking about the outfit I was wearing and the way my hair stuck out behind my right ear in a big puffy uncontrollable wave. My hair was nothing like Theresa Miller’s hair, and everyone liked Theresa Miller’s hair. I looked slightly down at the floor and made my way back to my desk silently, stealth-like, ninja-style. Good. No one was looking. Good.
The sun beat down ruthlessly as I marched across the spacious and vulnerable lawn of the outdoor Florida high school campus that was framed by one-story brick buildings. Doors hung open in fifteen feet intervals revealing classrooms filled with rows of chair and desk combinations and a teacher at the front of the room. I stepped into the shade of the canopy that covered a walkway and made my way to the classroom where I first learned about beakers and chemicals and where I memorized the table of elements and slouched in a chair staring dreamily into the dark afro in front of me. Today I was on a mission – no attending class, no slouching or dreaming, no goggle-wearing or chemical mixing. It was a new semester and a new day, and though Mr. Ramirez held my attention impressively throughout chemistry, I was not going to follow through with his recommendation that I take physics. Stepping up and into the laboratory-like room, I handed him a piece of paper that indicated I was intending to drop his physics class and do something else with that forty-two minutes of my life each day. Mr. Ramirez (who was about forty years old, dark-completed, good-looking, and the food for my fantasies of marrying off my mother to a middle-class man who could provide her with an easier life) pushed his moustached lips together, shook his head and said something like:

“Stephanie. Don’t do this,” and gave me a long hard look.

“Why are you doing this?”

Another pause.

I can’t for the life of me remember if I responded to him or just sat there staring at his face or my shoes.

“Tell you what, I’ll give you an A. Just take the class. You can do it.”

At the time I had constructed some perverse fantasy in my mind that this “bribe” was to keep me in his classroom as eye candy, or something exceptionally stupid like that. People told me that I was pretty and had since I was old enough to understand words, so nearly everything that happened to me was almost immediately designated as a response to my physical appearance. Now, as an educator who has counseled first-generation college students who were on the verge of dropping out, and as someone who has made similar “offers” just to keep students in the line of possibility I reread this historic event differently. I have sat in my office chair pushing my lips together, shaking my head:

“I will do everything I can to make this a good experience for you.”

“Don’t drop out. I will get you through this, you can count on me to do that.”

For the life of me I can’t remember their responses. Perhaps they stared silently at me, or at their shoes, or maybe they shook their head and mumbled something about not fitting in, not being able to manage family and school, not being able to talk in classes where they felt so different. Those details have left me, but the real physical pain of feeling my heart in my toes and knowing that I was about to lose one has stayed with me. Mr. Ramirez must have felt that same pain.

He was trying. He had to know that I was a recent newcomer, that I was from a family headed by a single woman at the time struggling to pay the bills, that I had been teetering on the edge of the abyss for at least two years, that I had the brains
and the motivation but not the know-how to find comfort within school walls. How difficult it must have been to watch me walk out the door with his signature on the paper confirming that I was now officially dropping his course, physics, a course that could have provided me with cultural capital had I thought about applying for college, a course that could have convinced me to pursue science beyond high school, a course that might have helped me find comfort within academic settings.

He knew.

I didn’t.

That part of the conversation never happened, but of course it’s so clear today. Even had that conversation taken place, what is a sixteen-year-old who hated school, despised witnessing the privilege of schoolmates, and needed to make every dollar possible to pay for her own clothes, food, shoes, and help with younger siblings and household expenses to do? I needed money, and school was placing too many boundaries around the hours I had for working. I transferred to the district vocational school where I took classes for a few hours in the morning and then left to go to work — to make money — at noon. Mr. Ramirez, in that moment, didn’t have a shot at me. He might have convinced me across a number of conversations and across time, but in that space of me smiling and handing over the “drop” slip from the high school office, he didn’t have a fighting chance. I was done. Gone.

The multiple, competing, and contradictory narratives of my mobility across social class divides are filled with tense spaces such as that constructed between Mr. Ramirez and myself on that hot Florida day. Near-misses I call them — moments when I might have begun down a path that was foreign to me and most of my family, moments that might have made me miss the carefully practiced beat of walking in working-poor shoes, moments that might have gone either way, though they were in the habit of going in the same direction as the moments for generations before me, moments that constantly threatened to reclaim any stake I had made on the path to mobility. Money and time were always at the center of those tensions for me, two concepts that I found intriguing as a young child but unable to control, at least in small ways, until I was a teenager. Both, however, are forms of capital that work for us or against us in various societal exchanges, and that was something I did recognize early on in life, as well as the fact that physical beauty and a feminine demeanor could be used nearly as well as money in most circumstances.

And use them I did.

FRACTURED TIMES ACROSS THE YEARS

| Gifted class. | Speech therapy. | Gifted class probation. |
| No gifted class. | General track. | Vocational School. |
| Skipped classes. | No lunch. | Off campus for lunch. |
| Free lunch. | Hiding for lunch. | Reading. |
| No reading. |
A (NON)READER

I can’t remember a single book I read in all of high school, not one. It seems impossible to me that I escaped without reading a book for class, or at least an entire book on my own outside of school (that would seem more reasonable than me reading a book that was assigned by a teacher). The Holy Bible is something that I do remember reading on my own lying in my bed turning the ultra thin pages carefully one by one as I fumbled through the archaic language and pieced together some idea of a story of Christianity. We had a Bible in our home, but we also had a statue of Buddha and books on astrology, and stories about reincarnation, so when I picked up the heavy Book it was purely out of curiosity that I did so, not out of any moral obligation to anything or anyone. My mom had already said to me many times, “It’s one of the best books ever written,” and that’s how I attacked it. As a book – a story – albeit quite powerful in history and contemporary times, but still a storybook.

I dabbled in some of the Stephen King books that my mom had stacks of, and I occasionally peeked into the Concise Light on Yoga book that was given to me as a fourteenth birthday gift by my biological father, and I devoured (and cried over) the snippets of my mom’s journals that I could get my hands on when she was nowhere around, but reading a book in high school? Nope. So it’s not surprising that I struggled so much when I went to community college: Cs, Ds, Withdrawals, Drops. The first year was like that not only because I wasn’t a reader or a studier, but because I had no idea what I was doing – and because there were boys and parties and friends and some freedom outside a full-time job as a waitress – a life I had not really known before that. So I didn’t do well. I did horribly in fact, except for the times when I could lean on the things I learned earlier in my academic career:

- Being a good girl was enhanced by being pretty, at least most of the time.
- A five paragraph essay is a solid way to organize an informational, non-narrative text.
- Area can be calculated by multiplying the length of a rectangular shape by the width.
- Wars were fought, but when and where and why and to what end. I had no idea.
- One really can dissect a frog if she puts her mind to something else.
- Two blue-eyed biological parents cannot produce a brown-eyed baby, even though two brown-eyed biological parents can produce a blue-eyed baby under the right conditions. (This was important – my mom had blue eyes, and the person she was married to at the time of my birth also had blue eyes. I had brown eyes. Thankfully, by the time I learned this genetic fact I already knew who my biological father was).

A PRIMARY SCHOOLER

Mrs. Frame stood me in the corner for most of my first grade year that I spent in a working-class industrial urban neighborhood in Cincinnati. I have no idea why she put me there so often, but I always believed that it was something I had done
wrong – something wrong about me. One day she stood me there for so long that my bladder decided it was time for me to go somewhere else, and as it released dribbles (at first) then streams of urine down my legs, through my socks, and into my shoes, Mrs. Frame found it in her heart (or perhaps in her rage) to allow me to find a restroom.

I hated her.

So many tragic stories constructed within, through, and reflecting on school. What on earth would motivate me to a lifetime imprisonment in the very institution that dealt such pain over and over and over and over and over again? What was it that pushed me, tugged at me, made me keep going when things looked tough, worse than tough, improbable, impossible, painful, disrespectful?

Mrs. Peck, the very, very old teacher I had in a rural Ohio second grade classroom who retired right after my year with her liked me. She called me pretty. She called me nice. She was cruel to some of the other kids in class but I loved her and I was grateful that she did not make me stand in corners. White hair was always whisked upon her head into a beehive-like hairdo. I was the “teacher’s pet,” a phrase that I learned for the first time that year – teacher’s pet. I liked being her pet. I did. And I liked that somehow during the middle of the year she realized I was a reader and moved me into the higher reading group that was taught by the woman (also really old) across the hall. Can’t remember her name, but I do remember reading round-robin style in her classroom day after day from thick hard-back books that were worn on the edges and had been flipped through many times before my fingers caught the corners.

Mrs. Zimmerman - third grade teacher same school as Mrs. Peck - introduced me to double-ended grading pens. The slim, slippery, silver stick pens that had a blue ball point on one end and a red ball point on the other were the first things that tempted my sticky fingers. I learned to steal in Mrs. Zimmerman’s classroom, but I also learned about being a teacher (perhaps a nasty correlation) as she let me help “grade” the other students’ worksheets they had completed while they sat in their tidy desks that sat in tidy rows that sat in a tidy room. Math worksheets were my favorite and I gleefully marked big X’s on the numbers of the problems that were answered wrong. In the top right hand corner I would write in extra large, curly red print signifying the number of problems missed (-7). It wasn’t until much later in my school career and in my teaching of children that I realized the infinite numbers of ways that such worksheets can be “scored” and interpreted. But in Mrs. Zimmerman’s classroom as I helped grade papers, take letters off of bulletin boards, and stayed inside from recess to help with general classroom cleaning, I began shaping my love for a way of being – a way of working with my hands and my mind inside school (I’ll skip the trajectory of stealing for now, it ruptures the dreamy, smooth, academic mobility narrative too much, no?). My public performances in school reflected that of a good girl: teacher’s pet, smiling, quiet, sweet-natured, steady-working, responsible, trustworthy, believable.

What else did I learn in school?

That being a “good girl” meant getting away with a lot of things:

– Getting out of class by telling outlandish lies that everyone believed
– Somehow maneuvering my way out of certain assignments without punishment
– Even graduating with fewer than the required number of credits by lying about
  my previous high school’s expectations for graduating.
  Mrs. Stritt, that dear fourth grade teacher of mine that taught upstairs from Mrs.
  Zimmerman (who tempted and inadvertently led me to stealing), taught me:

  *That I was a reader: The Headless Cupid* was the first book I read in her
classroom and I still have a copy today. I also discovered Judy Blume that
year and devoured every book of hers I could get my hands on.

  *That I was a researcher:* I did a report on Japan and my mom and I together
(along with the help of a cousin who was stationed with the Air Force in
Japan at the time) had a ball compiling interesting facts and pictures. Even as
a high schooler I wanted to learn Japanese and bought myself a number of
Japanese language books and tapes to help me.

  *That I was a dancer:* She taught a clogging class and I ended up being pretty
good – most likely because she was the dance teacher and she believed in me.

  *That some people (Mrs. Stritt) lived in subdivisions with two-story homes,
manicured lawns, and inground swimming pools.* I was shocked and
intimidated.

Could it all really boil down to Mrs. Stritt, that fourth grade teacher who smiled
and danced in ways that revealed a teensy weensy bit of mania? That salt-and-
pepper-haired woman who taught me to clog, clap-clacking my toes and heels to
mountain songs? That tall, hovering teacher who first convinced me that I was a
reader, a researcher, a dancer, a person worth noticing? How could it possibly
come down to this after thirty-six years of a life that has ebbed
and flowed,

  **crashed**

  and sailed

collided

  and skirted,

flowed

  and
e-b-b-e-d?

Everything prior to my fourth grade year seemed so complex: reading groups,
low reading group, teacher’s pet, grading papers with red ink, cartwheels in the
yard, fights in the street, high reading group, smoking cigarettes, multiplication
tables, fishing, helping put up bulletin boards, playing, dreaming. And then there is
fourth grade, so clear and simple as if it occurred yesterday: Japan research project,
*The Headless Cupid*, Theresa Miller’s long beautiful hair, *Are You There God? It’s
Me, Margaret*, SRA, clogging lessons after school, *Superfudge*, Mrs. Stritt’s house
on a Saturday morning for a rehearsal, the solar system, rows of desks, Iowa Basic
Skills Tests, Spanish language learning, UNO, speech therapy, gifted class.

But no, it’s impossible that my drive or motivation or willingness or ability
came from that year in fourth grade, because every bit of the way I have had to
claw, scratch, fight, cuss, push, shove, lie, steal, cajole and I wouldn’t have had to do those things if it was really about being a reader, a researcher, a dancer, a valuable person. “If you would’ve grown up in a little rich family all the pieces would fit together nicely like a jigsaw puzzle,” my mom recently told me, “but instead you grew up in a poor family and we had to jam those pieces together, nothing ever fit.”

The jagged edges of the puzzle pieces jab upward violently in every direction, nothing really “fits” comfortably or securely but is rather jammed into place after many near-misses, merthiolate episodes, transitions, losses, gains, victories. “Suck up and walk with your head high. You deserve to be there just as much as anyone else,” mom told me my entire life until I graduated from college and began teaching. Then she started encouraging me to “buck the system.” She knows all too well what it takes to get a break in this people-run world when you’re not one of the people who do the runnin’, and once I got that break she wanted me to use it toward social justice.

And so I do.

A PROFESSOR

“Good morning, how are you? Are you going to Chicago for AERA?” I stop in the hallway to greet a colleague before walking onto the streets of New York City and confidently hailing a TAXI that will take me to a trendy restaurant for brunch where I will meet another colleague. Planes, four-day-long out-of-town ventures paid for by work, cities across the country and world, fancy brunches. Moments of my life seem unbelievable, embarrassingly rich, and I often do my best to play down the excitement when I’m with my family – sometimes not telling them at all. To many in my family my life doesn’t only seem unbelievable, but it is truly not able to be believed, so foreign in concept and day to day reality that it’s easier to shake one’s head and not think about it at all. Just as it is often easier (and sometimes downright necessary) for me not to think about their daily lives just to get through the work day in the Big City. Until, of course, something happens and I find myself holding onto the door of a moving car and the skin comes off again and again.

It’s 2:28 am, Thursday morning. And I cry. I’ve been lying in bed awake now since midnight, mind swirling – my brother, my daughter’s school, my sister. My brother. What is he doing right now? Sleeping? Crying? Screaming? Seizing? I pray. Is it possible to grant him some peace? Give him a break? Help with the bills? He moves two steps forward and gets slung twenty backward – this time it’s Intensive Care for uncontrollable and unexplainable seizures. No insurance. Two children. A heart of gold, a mind to be envious of, a body worked over by roofs, oozing charisma, and no lucky breaks.

No good girl femininity to open doors with a smile.
No old boy networks to slide in at entry level.
Just struggling to find the rung missing from the ladder.
I stumble through the dark to my writing desk.
Tears dribble down my cheeks, my body jolts, my chin folds into itself. Eyelashes clump. Head throbs. Nose stuffs up.

I sniffle.
Breathe.
Sigh.
Slow down.

Why am I so far away? Why the fuck am I in New York! Who the hell do I think I am? Forgive me, brother. Forgive me for being selfish.

And I whisper through gritted teeth, a strained voice, closed eyes, “Don’t make me pay with my brother’s life, please. I can’t bear it. Me “making it” should not mean that he doesn’t get a shot at it, please. Please give him a chance!”

And the merthiolate gets rubbed over the skinless wounds, and I hurt. But he is the one dangling from the car door now, and I am sitting safely inside the driver’s seat with seatbelt fastened, airbags ready, and full coverage insurance.

I cry.
I sob.
I hate.
I resent.
I beg.
I demand.
I hope.

I walk in to work the next morning with a smile on my face, head held high, sucking up when I have to, and peer sideways without speaking when someone suggests not admitting a student who has a solid academic record but started off in community college.

Ouch.
And the burning persists inside that cocoon.
Even after the orange stains have faded.

Stephanie Jones
The University of Georgia
JUAN F. CARRILLO

2. FROM COMPTON TO THE HALLS OF ACADEMIA

Reflections on the Schizophrenic Habitus of a Chicano Scholarship Boy

THE MAKING OF THE “FOOD STAMP” INTELLECTUAL

I was born in south central Los Angeles in 1976 at a hospital known as “Killer King” because of its subpar medical treatment. The conditions were so bad that in August 2007, this appalling medical unit was shut down. I am alive, you are reading these words, this meeting was not supposed to happen. Hola. From birth until my high school graduation in 1994, I lived in L.A. area neighborhoods that did not have Barnes and Noble or Borders bookstores. In my ‘hood, liquor stores were the only places that had “reading material” for sale. When I attempted to read magazines in these places, I recall store owners screaming: “You no buy, you no open!” To be honest, had I gone to grab a six-pack of beer, the same person would have given me the thumbs up. That was considered the natural order of things. It was right in front of me; I was a threat, a problem, rarely imagined as a capable Houdini of prose and diction.

I never recall anyone opening the door for the census count; we were here, but not really, “here.” I never got the feeling that we counted. NASDAQ exchanges were replaced by street hustles where blue chip stock meant solidifying a posture that earmarked “cool” and “real.” At the street level, to be intelligent was given credence only if one could master these two virtues. As the son of Mexican immigrants who only reached the third grade, I got the sense that many police officers (and some teachers) expected me to live out the floating signifier of barrio boy with an aerosol can, the gang banger cruising with a stunning gaze of dissent. My graffiti and representations of “my set” did come to bear, but not in stereotypical molds. Instead, I focused on pursuing a life long quest to name my location and begin to subpoena all the criminals (the books I was forced to read often referred to these people as “heroes”) that put me where I was. I became centered in world of ideas. With my readings and fascination with cultural criticism, I tore at the leaves of society’s poison ivy. Now, this is no Horatio Alger story; this is the Juan F. Carrillo story. I did not go, alone, from “rags” to “riches.” Instead, I went from one ghetto to another with the help of all the mythologies on mobility.

You see, I am a maladjusted meditation, a doctoral student who conducted a discourse analysis of Western ontological claims and realized that “…for a man
whose only weapon is reason there is nothing more neurotic than contact with unreason” (Fanon, 1967, p. 118). The “unreason” that Fanon and I speak of relates to the trauma that arrives in our subconscious when the subaltern individual, the “I,” encounters the irrational and violent logic of the colonial semiotic that contends that something is wrong with us. So we are told that in order to remedy our pathologies, we have to leave our organic knowledge structure and seek out Webster’s diction, Martha Stewart’s tastes, and earn credentials at universities that cannot even come close to the spiritual Smithsonians that we embody.

For most of my first 18 years of life, I was raised on food stamps. I grew up amidst a misguided system of reparations for the poor; a band aid finality to a class system that needs a Marshall Plan. Looking back, I can see the penetrating gaze of cashiers at supermarkets that would stare at my sister and I with a beckoning disgust because we were poor. I am the food stamp intellectual. Nourished, watched, and analyzed by the nation’s committees seeking to “help” and “understand” people “like me.” I recall eating food with labels that were minimalist in nature: “beans” and “cheese.” My poverty made me peripheral, the way attachments accompany an email.

Crossing social class boundaries was not a pleasant experience. This is the story of my formal schooling and how social class mobility influenced an internal battle for self-authoring. Like Rodriguez (1982), I do believe there is a “pedagogy to glean,” one vested in the unlearning of the natural and experiential due to the obedience to a fraudulent master educational narrative.

THE UNNATURAL SCHOOLHOUSE: K-8

I started school with a chip on my shoulder. I knew that in a matter of five years, I would surpass the highest level of education of anyone in my immediate family. I filled out my parent’s job applications at age seven. I was ready to talk to city council members at age nine. I wrote a Marxist type critique of society before I hit my sixth grade year. The unbalanced, immoral sanctioning of opportunity structures to those with certain forms of social capital angered the very days I was supposed to enjoy and simply play with G.I. Joes.

The unnatural separation from self started with removal of my native language. In first grade, I was told that I was “too smart” to be learning anything in Spanish. I was told that I no longer needed to stay within my native language, I had to move towards the official language: English. I got put in an advanced English reading course. Kids at the lunch line were amazed at how I was already getting to read some generic book that was preordained for the smart kids. Being pushed into this new world resembles the infamous crossover of Latino musicians, who seem to get caught up in the idea that selling and producing for an English audience means they have made it. In retrospect, this was a violent transition, one that began to mold a Eurocentric, middle class consciousness. I was constantly surrounded by bulletin boards in class that stated: “Education is the key to success.” Education for what, for whom, and based on what model? I rarely unpacked it that way until much later. College was a far away place that was somehow more important than
family, God, and experiential self-discovery. I was in two worlds: my mom said, “if you are tired, stay home.” School life replied, “no pain, no gain, rigor, rigor, rigor!” I listened to “school.” I would run, crying to school when I woke late. My mother was in awe; she would brag about my intelligence to family members but could not understand why I was so fanatical about the white man’s linear and colonial exorcism.

The battle between the public and the private man began here. My name became “Wu-aan” and I was told to sit at my desk with an upright posture. Things got categorized by attendance, grades, behavior, and our respective loyalty to some elaborate decoration of American songs. The hidden curriculum (Anyon, 1980) was not molding a working class identity, but instead forcing a loyalty to people that wore moccasins –Pilgrims– and had these strange scrolls of white hair – George Washington and friends. It was like going to a museum, a place full of artifacts with which I had very little in common. We clapped, we sang, we held hands in unison, as little boys and girls that were going to be someday be “good” and “productive” citizens.

The United States of Amnesia (Dyson, 2004) reaped through the lectures and lessons of my primary school teachers. A pastoral, desensitized Dixie America centered the imagery behind the stories they would tell. White female teachers, with good intentions, focused not on the 3 R’s but instead on the RWC’s: reading, writing, and colonization. Clearly, “dominant groups not only create structures that serve to oppress subordinate groups, but they also create meanings that normalize these structures” (Foster, 2000, p. 164). It was so cute, so packaged, and so subtle. These teachers, these college educated professionals had no inclination of the “cultural discontinuities” (Foster, 2000) that I was experiencing. In many ways, school trained me to look at my family through the lens of the ethnocentric anthropologist. I was being socialized into developing a deficit gaze when trying to understand their limited English speaking skills and blame them for their chronic inability to master Capitalism’s expectations. I wanted to be the good son, to respect a rich and complex cultural toolkit, but schooling had a color, a consciousness that resembled the sterile suburbs that would scare me many years later. When my cousin “Tico” had a birthday party, I was not there. When family members had a Sunday family get together at a local park, I was not there. I was outside of this world, sitting on a chair in the backyard next to a pit bull reading Shakespeare. It is this push and pull that took Juan, far, far away from the Spanish love song and the satire of my father’s “mistakes” which he framed as “resistance.”

In sixth grade, Mrs. Graham noticed that I would write with a clean handwriting style and I maintained a “good boy” approach to my studies. Somewhere between the show “Reading Rainbow” and more nostalgic stories about our founding fathers, I recall having to take a citywide exam. It was a beautiful southern California day when I began to answer reading comprehension questions and work through a few math problems. This test became a marker. The scores came back and I had the third highest score among all the sixth grade classes. My two best friends and I, all three of us low SES Chicano kids from the barrio, beat out the Asian and white kids. In the back part of the room, I was summoned for a private
conversation with the teacher. I was told that due to my high scores on this exam, I could attend any middle school in Long Beach.

I decided to attend middle class school in a very distant part of my city of residence. The school was bordered by a golf course on one side and some type of camp organization on the other end. Middle class Anglo kids made up the majority of the student body. I got “imported” here on daily basis via a yellow school bus full of Mexican origin students and African Americans. There was a painfully average intensity in the pedagogical approach of teachers and students. My peers seemed to be living out some relaxing California ethos of years long gone. This was an uneventful time, two years of easy classes and boredom.

“PLEASE DON’T TAKE ME THERE”: THE LYNWOOD-COMPTON YEARS

My memories of my move to Lynwood and Compton, California in the early 1990’s are part of some type of Shakespearan tragedy waiting to happen. I begged my mother to keep me in North Long Beach, on the litmus test of violence; I felt I may make it to twenty-one there. We got kicked out of the apartments where we lived. My parents could not afford the one bedroom apartment. Upon our departure, we ended up initially moving in with family members. I remember the uncomfortable battle for space amongst my cousins, where I felt like a leech, living off of someone else’s daily version of the American dream.

After a few months, we got an offer my parents could not refuse. We moved to Lynwood, CA. I begged my mother to reconsider; I seemed to be conscious of the way that space would affect my life chances. This is part of the Lynwood-Compton Argonaut, neighboring cities made up of mostly low SES communities often plagued by macro and micro scale violence. I was to move into a family pass-me-down. A home, a shack entrenched so many feet behind the pedestrian walking area that you always wondered if the place was haunted. An ugly old place, full of strange paint job combinations, with a little front door that had torn webbing which allowed flies to come in and out freely. It was the first house I ever recalled living in. Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and other rap maestros provided literary audiomentaries of the drive by shootings and social decay I was immersed in. I was forcefully pushed into a world where police helicopters, the mafia, and the gaze of young men that looked like me seemed to reflect a hopelessness and despair that challenged my optimism on a daily basis. I was 15 years old and scared.

I entered my freshmen year (1990) with a sociological disposition. I had to work with deeper, more transparent forms of survival. My high school was located in south Los Angeles amidst its post white-flight era—it was juxtaposed amongst urban blight, gang warfare, and teachers with low expectations. When I took the bus to school, there were no guarantees that I would come back home safely. “Gangsta” rappers came from these neighborhoods—their stories of social upheaval and incongruent suffering and misery were part of my story. Overt tracking placed the majority of the student body (mostly low SES Latino and African American students) in the school I attended into the blue-collar job market. All of my friends attended classes where “messing around” was accepted because
most teachers merely cared about getting paid. I remember going home during those first weeks, literally crying and sitting in my room wondering if I was doomed to be killed either through the street exchanges or through a class-based society that reproduces its outcomes. It was a double bind, something that I should have never been forced to consider. Through media images, I could sense that there was a parity of expectations. There was a mythical dream to be captured and education was a key to get “that.”

I earned fairly good grades that first year of high school. Little work was expected, simple rote memorization of scientific facts and many courses that often showed movies—that was it. There was this world of college a few years away, but with this education how was I expected to go there and perform well? Additionally, my father was dealing with alcoholism and my mother was asking me to hurry up and graduate so I could help support the family. School was not paying the bills.

On a rainy day, during my freshmen year, I recall walking over to the district office to pick up a form after school. This was some type of legal document that would consider exceptional cases for transfer into other schools. Getting a poor education forced me into action. I filled it out and detailed the lack of books in each class, I described the teachers who slept and read the paper, and delved into the unsafe conditions. A few weeks later, I got a response. The letter from a district official conceded that I could not transfer because my perceived problems were not synonymous with some dire, dangerous condition. Really? That day, I was able to draw very specific connections between my social class and the connections with education.

My sophomore year came with deliberate speed. I was a couple of feet taller and an even more politicized self. I approached the first day of school with the idea that I was going to force my dreams into reality. At home I would read books about how Michael Jordan and Olympic athletes used visualization techniques to “see” their outcomes. Every night before I went to bed, I developed images of going to class at UCLA or USC. Clearly, there were no guarantees. Structure and agency are inseparable. With the help of my mother’s encouraging sentiment, I attempted to “school my way out” of my situation. She was always around, cooking food and giving me pan dulce (sweet bread), with the additional intimacy that came with her nostalgic stories, chismes (gossip), and her humanistic disposition. This was the best Starbucks music one could hear. It was all premised on supporting me as I worked through geometry problems, Plato’s Republic, and the visions of utopia I would try to map out on a dirty napkin.

One of the first things that happened that sophomore year was that I forced a different tracking structure on myself. I spoke at length with counselors about tracking me into honors courses. I developed a case, lobbied, and then saw the words turn into action. In these little offices, counselors made and killed dreams: with a simple sip of coffee and a ballpoint pen, peoples’ lives were designed. I was aggressive; besides, were they not working for me? Before I knew it, I was moved into another, supposedly better world.
I was now an honors student. My classes were “over there,” in a space where the smart kids hung out. For the most part, I preferred to hang with peers that were not here. So, I kept my more “popular” and “cool” cues related to walking, posture, and the gaze. The smart kids seemed oblivious to this; they just talked about science fiction movies and worked on classroom assignments. I framed the “smart” world as simply a place that was supposed to prepare me for college.

To my surprise, the honors courses were for the most part—more of the same. Teachers read the newspaper and chit-chat was allowed. I could not believe it; even though I tried to de-track myself from that “other” education, I still got that “other” education. I began to develop a psychological injury. I was overwhelmed by all the challenges I was forced to face. I wanted to learn. I wanted to be a leader. Yet at every turn, I got nada (nothing). The infamous question arose: Why me?

I needed an outlet, a breather, a place to vent. During my sophomore year, I joined the cross-country team and found a little family there. The training sessions were so hard, so full of physiological pain that I used this as the venue where I would scream at the pigmentocracy, at the social class structure, and space where I would take every struggle and step on it as I ran, literally. Students would often question our dedication to “running around” for such long hours. For me, the pain that came from those intense workouts elicited the embodiment of struggle. The “suffering” seemed to help me find answers to my most pressing questions. What I have never explicitly disclosed publicly is that I was an angry person for most of my first eighteen years of life. I was emotionally torn by the way it feels to continuously not have enough money to take the bus, to be forced to attend the worst public schools, and to be so alone, so marginalized as an adolescent who did follow “the rules”. All I wanted from life was to learn, to deconstruct, to fight for social justice, and to honor my mother by being a “good person.” I hid this pain all while using the fire and rage that it forged to envision new ideas and face humiliation with dignity and resilience.

I had an average year in terms of my success on the cross-country team (and in track and field). But what was crucial at this point was a friendship I developed with a runner from another school. She was a Caucasian girl that attended a school in a middle class neighborhood. I took her “insider” information about what she was learning in her class and made a long list. I remember some of my notes: Shakespeare, Milton, Physics, Calculus I, Thomas Paine, and John Locke. From this point on, I spent many of my weekends at local libraries teaching myself. I would grab books on philosophy, critical theory, and the authors this young lady suggested. I started aiming for the thought patterns of what I perceived to be “great thinkers”; no longer was I going to school to compete with my peers. I had new imaginary friends full of scenes dedicated to their entry into my life. I imagined Malcolm X coming over for dinner, T.S. Eliot told me how he got through his nervous breakdown, and Hegel began to deconstruct his master-slave dialectic over a game of “horse” at the local park.

I finished my sophomore year with straight A’s. My junior year was more of the same, substandard education and all A’s. I began to focus on college applications. I made a decision to leave California. I was disappointed and literally living in fear
every day—I needed some refugee spot, somewhere, far, far away. I decided to apply to Notre Dame, Georgetown, Michigan, Penn State, and a few other schools. I imagined a sanctuary. I had a romanticized view of college. I recall thinking of how a series of red and yellow leaves would fall on page 35 of a novel that would expand the *cul de sac* of my humble beginnings. I co-invented the idea that all of college was this peaceful; all of college was this rewarding.

During the initiation of my senior year of high school, colleges began to send letters of admittance. I could not believe it. I thought no college would ever want to send their super clean and elegant envelopes to this shack surrounded by puddles of murky water. I was accepted with large financial aid packages to most of the schools I applied to. Nobody in my family had ever attended an American university. Eyes all set on me. When I woke up sometimes, I began to think, this is going to be way too hard, I should just stay home. Other days I felt courageous, compelled to see my college dream through. On all accounts though, I did see college as a protected, somewhat utopian space.

**COLLEGE: EXPERIENCING THE “ART AND CRAFTS” OF THE MIDDLE CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS**

In 1994, as I was finishing the last semester of high school, I got the push I needed to go to college away from California. The transcending event took place on a Saturday night. I remember hearing gunshots. Normal, I thought. This time though, a window shattered right near where I was standing. I hit the ground and began to pray. Loud bangs and screams surrounded me. I began to develop an intense breathing pattern and crawled over to a phone so that I could call 911. I remember closing my eyes and begging for my survival, the surreal sounds of gunfire and voices in distress made me think that I would probably die that night.

When the chaos settled, I got up and looked out the window. Dozens of people were all in a circle, looking dazed. I began to think: My father? Is he dead? I walked towards the gathering of people and everyone seemed to look at me with a devastated angst. When I got to the scene, right there in my front yard, I saw my cousin lying on the ground and looking at me. I could see three bullet holes and blood everywhere. I knelt down; I grabbed him and began to cry uncontrollably.

“Hey, Fidel, listen, talk to me, you are going to make it. Look, we’ll go play baseball tomorrow and didn’t you say you wanted to visit your mom in Mexico? I’ll go with you, I promise, I’ll save up.” Nothing came back my way. He was dead. I was shattered. I had friends go to jail, peers die overnight; this was the culmination of way too much physical and economic violence.

The pain from this incident was surmounted by random phone taps and surveillance of our home by groups of people we could not identify. We got the sense that we were next. We could all die at any moment. We moved in a matter of weeks to Compton, right down the road next to my aunt Noni. My family and I were like little scared puppies, walking in a world of neglect where no shelter and sense of humanity seemed to come our way. I had seven college letters of admission in my backpack and a family looking at me for guidance.
Suffice to say, luck and fate did come our way. My mother sued a local factory for over two months of back pay. One day, she came over to me and gave me a check for $80,000. I could not believe that amount of money she had received from her settlement. My mother had this anti-establishment, civil rights orientation and a tenacious spirit tethered with an amazing verbal repository. Whenever she felt an injustice was aimed at her, she channeled all of her resources at settling the score and maintaining her dignity. This was a character trait I began to model throughout my life.

Upon receiving the large sum of money, I got on the phone and made calls to realtors in Arizona. For some reason, I thought Arizona was a safe, affordable place. I wanted to make sure that if I went to college, my parents would be in a peaceful place. I woke up my dad on a sunny Saturday morning in the summer of 1994 and got him to drive us to Phoenix. At the first exit within city limits, I told him to get out. I contacted a realtor and began home shopping at age 18. I put money down on a nice, humble, but much bigger home than we could ever imagine living in—a three bedroom home with a swimming pool, not to mention a community that seemed to be happy in its serious approach to “quiet” and tranquility.

With my parents taken care of, I made a decision to attend the University of Michigan. I left Compton and rode a dirty Greyhound bus en route to Ann Arbor, MI in 1994. I was nervous and excited to see what was “out there.” I felt like I was going to discover white people and their ways. I traversed little towns in Colorado, ate a hot dog near the surreal looking Salt Lake and saw way too much corn in Nebraska.

My freshmen year of college shaped the way that I experienced college for many of the years that came later. There was sharp contrast between the way that many middle-class Anglo kids perceived university study and the way I approached it. I went into my first year eager to use knowledge as a vehicle for spiritual mobility. Most of my peers would have “gang” type frat parties and consumed drugs the way I used to chew gum. The normalization or pimping of ethics was unlike anything that I had ever seen. Much of what I heard from a distance, in my barrio, seemed to suggest that those that came from the suburbs aspired to some higher formula, thereby explaining their social status. I debunked that myth quickly. Every year of college, I began to lose faith. I began to tell my mother that I was alone, stolen, placed in a middle class world of broken and slanted mirrors.

Any simple gaze at my college transcripts shows a pattern. I transferred schools just about every two years. I could not bear the control, mediocrity, and hegemonic forces that were forcing me to experience and orient my life in a certain manner. I could sense that the schooling was beginning to take more than it was giving. I was mastering prose in English and studying for so many hours that I had lost touch with people, “real” people. Beyond that, I was static in some ways. The mobility discourse did not take me to utopia, U.S.A. I was caught, tied into a world of promises and blatant attacks on my cultural and spiritual schemata. In college we
debated the other worlds, the more justice oriented spaces, but we never really “lived there.”

I built up a series of debts: student loans, credit cards, and promises to my mother. The first generation encroachment on middle class college boy life has had a violent and dark impact. If had to do it all over again, I am not sure that I would have attended college. I have a massive thirst for knowledge, but sometimes I think: there is no education here.

T.S. Eliot, Dostoevsky, and Hegel all had nervous breakdowns. Deep, amidst most of their angst was their laser-sharp understanding of the dire mimicry embellished in the mediocrity of much human thought and action. The universal tunnel vision of a dominant core begs for critique. There are many worlds, many views—to go to college in the United States seems to deny this multiplicity in practice (it hides behind its theoretical plurality). So, on a melancholic day, three years into my PhD studies, it was my turn. I sat on the chair where I spent countless hours reading and I began to have trouble breathing. My lower body weakened. My mind traveled into a series of metaphors and my soul had nowhere to hide. I wondered: why did I decide to go to college? How much have I lost along the way? I got weaker when I concluded that I had nowhere to go. When ethics, social class, and a dedication to a transcendental approach to life collide with America’s cultural production of the educated man: I lost.

Going to school. I got very good at it. I collect and regurgitate thoughts to be positioned as privileged over more transcendental experiences. This life-long process has pulled me further and further away from my parents, from my child like imagination and fascination with the connections between baseball cards, ideas, and the human condition. I left my past so that I could become “educated.” There really is little education here. There was nothing wrong with the “me” of yesterday, there is a lot wrong with the “me” of today. I fell for the magic trick in four acts: elementary, middle school, high school, and college. I may just be too sensitive. Or maybe, I am just in love with the search for authentic and holistic education.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The battle for a poised self resulted in what I term as a schizophrenic habitus. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that habitus is “not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perceptions of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes” (p. 170). Having a middle class habitus increases the chances for educational success due to the similarities to school and pedagogical cultures in American schools. Habitus is an important contribution to structural analysis of social stratification, but in it traditional, bounded conceptualization it fails to consider “…the complexities of situational identity or of multiple cultural and social identities acquired by an individual over time, or the active role that children can play in their own socialization” (Reed-Danahay, 2000, p. 226). A schizophrenic...
*habitus* recognizes that there is not a seamless transfer of one habitus for another based on social class markers and conditions, but rather, a dialogic diaspora of *habitus* formation. In my case, similar to the experience of many other students of color, the schizophrenic identity structure comes from interactions with devaluing and dehumanizing social structures.

For me, *schizophrenic habitus* works with a *scholarship boy* identity (Hoggart, 2006). Like Rodriguez (1982), a self identified scholarship boy, I often question the role that formal schooling has had in creating a Panama Canal between the Juan of yesterday and the one that is here today. Hoggart (2006) frames these students as being “uprooted and anxious.” His conceptualization of the scholarship boy situates the experiences and feelings of students that leave their working class background through their meticulous attention and success within the scholarship/school system.

Social class matters. Mobility of soul matters more. Students of color from the working class should be allotted the spaces to merge the *funds of knowledge* (Moll et. al, 1992) of their upbringing with the value-laden education and discourses of higher education in the United States. The totality of what I had in the past and the totality of what I have in the present is not what I want. What I want is to have these two worlds in conversation as I embark on my version history, education, and success.

Many of my peers often talk about the infamous achievement gap. They ask me to return to teaching, to help in the “fight” for bringing all young men and women to a leveled playing field with Caucasian students. This is an honorable deed, honorable mission in some respects. Yet, I leave our discussions feeling empty. Why do we need to move into suburbia and learn rote facts on par with middle class Anglo kids to envision “legitimacy” and “success?” Is that “education?” Why is that standard the primordial goal of our one life on Earth? How much do you lose along the way?

So, I did leave the barrio to get educated. I was an obedient and star student. There will be many more that will leave the “port” and traverse challenging waters for their chance at acquiring *culture, knowledge,* and *civilization.* When you get to this mythical *Stonehenge,* remember this: stone, in some ways, is just “stone.” It is all made out of conditions and materials that you have there at home. Bring your *passport* and be reflexive about your blind spots. Similarly, while the well-intentioned author Jonathan Kozol (1991) may speak of the dire conditions from which you come, rearrange the discourse and be conscious of the dire conditions that are not limited to “ghetto schools,” but also associated with cathedral looking universities. Understand that we never really “rise up” by “making it” in the one-dimensional narrative that is: dominant culture. Instead, we are fractured beings; most working class students of color are, because we enter spaces where our memories, feelings, and histories are rarely validated on our terms. The social construction of *dreams* and hierarchies violates something. It is a missionary rape of sorts. It is 1492 all over again, through the *common sense* narrative of going to school. It hurts. You have to experience it to truly understand it. Still though, I refuse to bear witness to the complete futility of my choices. Through my readings,
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writing, friendships, and travels along the way, I have begun an intense healing process. I am unearthing my own archaeology. This is an inspiring opportunity, one that is allowing me to map out the exhaustive dimensions of my subconscious, culture, and humanity.

REFERENCES


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