

An Autoethnography of Working-Class Education

A thesis

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

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April 2013

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*To Caleb
And Quiet Encouragement*

ABSTRACT

This thesis tells the story of the author's elementary and secondary education in public school in southwestern Pennsylvania, through anecdotes and first-person narration. In analytical chapters, the author examines the events through the lens of critical literacy education theories, including those of Paolo Freire, Valerie Walkerdine, Timothy Lensmire, and others. With a particular emphasis on the ways in which social class influenced her education, she also examines the effect of the label "gifted" on her educational outcomes, including her participation in the Pennsylvania Governor's School program for intellectually gifted students. She concludes by considering the importance of education in the lives of working-class students who will not pursue intellectual career paths and offers advice to teachers for reaching these students.

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An introductory note on the fate of working-class students attempting to break the education barrier...

This thesis is the result of far too much anxiety, time, and effort. I was cocky at the beginning—as an undergraduate I wrote two theses, easily, one of which was fifty-plus pages of social and political analysis—entirely in French. I thought this one would be easy, especially given the nature of the subject matter: Me. Quickly, the issues brought forth when I opened the vault of my memory brought out years and years of resentment, disappointment with myself and others, and caused me to lose sight of my subject even further. I became depressed and anxious. Obviously, there were other issues I was confronting at the time, but the fact that I was not immediately employable as a *Smart Working-Class Woman Who Totally Earned It* was a hard, hard fact to accept. I dropped out. I took a series of low-paying, mostly minimum wage jobs, which I think, vaguely, were a way for me to reassert that I was not ashamed of where I came from, of who I *really* was.

During this time period I was dealing with the physical effects of my stress. They were debilitating. I would describe them, but I don't have to; at one point in my research, I found an article, "Marking the Body," written by my own thesis advisor, Timothy Lensmire, in an anthology entitled *Trajectories: The social and educational mobility of education scholars from poor and working class backgrounds*—basically, the exact question I wanted so desperately to take up in this thesis. He wrote of a time in his life in which:

...the skin on my chest on the left side, over my heart, was sensitive to the touch. I thought I had the flu. The rest of my chest, then out through my arms and fingers, then down through my belly and groin and legs and feet—eventually all so sensitive that wearing clothes and shoes hurt...Even after tenure came (I wished so hard that that's what was needed) my skin betrays me. Neurologists, dermatologists, allergists, endocrinologists, -ists, -ists, -ists—for a year and a half they told me they didn't know what was wrong (they still don't). At night I hurt, didn't sleep, took up repeating prayers I had learned as a child, over and over, to pass the time, since I no longer believed. I gave up going to doctors. Things calmed down, the pain lessened. It flares up often enough. I get by.

To say that reading this text was shocking to me is like saying it gets a wee bit chilly here in Ely, Minnesota, my new home—a major understatement. I had always felt

a connection with professors like Tim, those whom I knew had fought in the same way I had, been misjudged as I had, experienced the same self-doubt. But here, he was describing the same mysterious symptoms that had led me away from my research project for over a year, to the same series of doctors—all the “-ists”—all of whom had turned me away, saying there was nothing wrong with me. A particularly nasty neurologist prescribed a nerve pill, essentially writing me off as crazy on his prescription pad. I hated it at the time, but the funny thing was, when I finally entered therapy over the whole ordeal, the skin issues subsided. Like Tim, “it flares up often enough,” but still, “I get by.”

The situation made me think, indeed, I probably was crazy. Surely no other graduate students were getting so worked up over their theses. I watched my classmates graduate and move on to positions in universities with the seemingly effortless ease I knew I once possessed. Meanwhile, I was working at Goodwill for minimum wage, in a town in the middle of nowhere, wondering how this had all happened.

Reading Tim’s words, though, made me feel a sense of camaraderie that renewed my belief in my own ability to finish this project—to tell an important story. If I was crazy, then so was Tim, and I really respect his type of crazy. In fact, we were all crazy. It was a silly idea for all of us, those born to poor families, to uneducated families, to think we could make it, unnoticed, in a world built for and by the middle and upper classes. The words “working class,” as we all know, are just a nice way of saying “lower class” and there was a reason why we were born in the lowest one.

Yet for all of us, some brief moment of ecstasy overtakes which, if only in our own crazed minds, takes us away from the food stamps, the scorn of classmates, the alcoholic fits of frustrated parents. I fought monsters in R.L. Stine’s *Goosebumps* Choose-Your-Own-Adventures before moving on to a teenage wink-wink-nudge-nudge about what happens behind rose bushes with Nathaniel Hawthorne and finally bitching about how Jesus-Christ-men-really-are-the-worst with Doris Lessing. Tim looked up to Big John Dewey as a big brother and crudely sized up Virginia Woolf’s assets. We all did what we had to do, those of us with minds bigger than the opportunities of our births.

All of which brings me back to our mysterious conditions. I think there is (and as Tim found out when getting tenure didn't stop the symptoms, always will be) something inherently wrong with our presence in the place we want to be—the universities, the middle class, “career” jobs. We can change our accents, our style of dress, be more “assertive” as I have been scolded many times. But our bodies know—we are betraying our people when we do these things. They fight back, telling us no-no-no. But we can't go back. We love where we came from even as we need to get away. We wrote novels in our minds to stop ourselves from crying at the daily reality of everything. The unfairness of the circumstances handed to our people and the unfairness of how, somehow, we were the ones to stand a shot at getting away from it.

This contradiction—to desire to no longer be what we were, but to refuse to become like *them*—makes us the crazy people we are. We are audacious. We will not accept their rules, even though it means having to write our own, with the rest of the world saying it's totally nuts, never going to happen, never going to be like that. And our bodies will tell us, either in incessant itching or that nagging voice of your mother in the back of your mind, reminding you where you came from, when we have strayed too far from our homes, even if it's just metaphorically. Tim and I both felt this contradiction; it manifested in a rejection of success, nearly a flat-out desire to just up and fail at the whole thing. Being a failure and crawling home would at least give me an identity I knew. But a working-class student who breaks into the ranks of the middle class, but maintains the dignity of respect for her roots? To “avoid both success and failure” as Tim calls it in “Marking the Body”? Well we all know that's some kind of crazy new idea right there.

This thesis is my engagement with myself, my reflection on where I came from, where I'm going, and what the hell education had to do with it all. It's also my engagement with classical and contemporary texts on the subject, assessing the ways in which their theories and research align with the lives of students like me. In this way, my life can be a validation of the necessity for this kind of theory. This thesis is also my way of saying I was right, even if I was crazy—I kept going despite all my own and others' doubts. I still have yet to see the economic “fruits” of my education and labor. I'm

unemployed (as I have been, every time I've gotten a month or two to work on this thing). But my mind has produced something I am proud of. And that is good enough for now. Read this thesis in the chronological order of the story of my education as it played out—the odd chapters—or jump around with me, like my brain does so wantonly from story to analysis and back again by stopping off at the even chapters. Linear writing is too easy for these kinds of stories.

I am not normally one for sentimental thank yous, because I find them poorly worded and cliché, and am not yet a sufficient poet to write one that doesn't turn my stomach. That being said, Tim Lensmire's name needs to be placed here, so that whatever various definitions and ways of communicating gratitude exist can be acknowledged as all belonging to him. Additionally, Thom Swiss rolled into my life, kicked some poetry at me, and rolled out again, casually smoking a cigarette, but not leaving before remarking, off-handedly, "Krista's going to be writing poetry for the rest of her life." He was right, obviously, and few events have changed my life so much for the better.

Thank you both.

1. Education before Schooling

I went for a walk today. Unremarkable, sure, but that isn't done here. Children play in the surrounding woods, but people don't go on leisurely strolls. There is no relaxation to be found in this activity; it's isolating and unwieldy. There are no sidewalks and houses are too far apart to feel as though one is really exploring the "neighborhood". The cracked streets (when they are paved at all) are so winding and narrow, full of hills, that it isn't safe to march down them. One has the constant feeling of being at the bottom of a roller coaster ride, awaiting the inevitable moment when the riders will emerge at the top of the hill and plummet uncontrollably toward you, without ever knowing you were there, or reasonably expecting you to be. Nonetheless, I took the family dog and tried to see things I have been seeing for twenty-some years, anew.

It was desolate. Dry, cracking leaves fell around us. The dog stopped occasionally to sniff some roadkill. I only noticed it when he made a show of pulling off to the side of

the road; it was so well camouflaged in the dirt. We walked, but didn't make it far. I knew that further down the street, neighbors would have much larger dogs roaming free, protecting their property from intruders like myself. The fear of this outside presence feels unwarranted and paranoid to me. The only likely arrival would be a package courier, an expected guest, or someone innocently idling like I was. Yet, I still recognized the worry of outsiders' influence as one that I felt for many years, one that my brothers and parents still feel. As we approached, I realized I was now one of those outsiders and, feeling my presence was unwelcome, I turned home. The dog reluctantly went with me, disappointed his glimpse of any outside turf was cut short, lasting, perhaps only ten minutes and seeing only three new houses.

We left the hallowed property of my neighbors. Living in Minneapolis, I walked my dog freely in front of the houses of countless others. Here, though, I know, life is different. This, ostensibly my home, the place responsible for rearing me, teaching me the fundamentals, forming my world view, this is a place that is unforgiving of outsiders. The stereotype of the isolated, rural, suspicious blue-collar family is accurate and all around me; it is what I am and yet what I am not. I respect this and take my leave.

When I moved to Minneapolis after my graduation from Penn State, I brushed aside any culture shock I felt. I believed (perhaps correctly) that after studying abroad in Tanzania, Mexico, and France, the difference between my life in Minneapolis and my life in Economy Borough, Pennsylvania, was essentially meaningless. Now, a few years later, when I return home for visits, I experience the sense of clarity that all myopic people feel when the optometrist tries a new lens at their checkups—I didn't realize until that moment what I couldn't see. My new prescription of education, experience abroad, and close friends of totally different backgrounds has allowed the totality of my past in Economy to come into sharper relief. But, like all myopic people, I rely on these enhancements to help me see; I trust them, but can never be sure of my vision. My own faculties are forever impaired.

As a teenager, I wanted out. There is nothing exciting about that narrative, and I imagine even teens in some of the most exciting places imaginable experience this yearning. While someone from New York City could sympathize with a rural intellectual

teen wanting to “get out” and see the world, in the end, these sentiments can usually be pared down to adolescent rebellion and a desire for independence. It’s not my intent to say my desires were special in any way. Rather, as an educator, I want to now understand the inseparable relationship between my advanced education and the culture divide I now feel between myself and the people I was raised among. This study is my attempt at understanding why, the more I was educated, the more I wanted to leave behind everything I knew. Education, itself, is the task of making the unknown knowable; it shouldn’t necessitate the rejection of the known, but, in my case, it certainly did. I began to follow a different road, equally winding and bumpy, unsafe and unwelcoming, nonetheless, different. I don’t think, after years of reflection and all the education money (or rather, indebtedness) can buy, I can really begin to comprehend the story of the path I was on, the one I chose to follow, with varying degrees of control, and why when I find myself right back where I started, I feel so damned lost. This is just one *essai*, one effort thrust out there, spinning its wheels in the dirt of Beaver County to move us all forward in our knowledge of working-class education, and the whole system itself.

“Working-class houses are not miniatures of middle-class houses, neither of real ones nor of those created by literature or constructed for television.” –Linda Brodkey

For an entrance essay to the honors college at my undergraduate institution, I was asked, “If you were to give a tour of your hometown, where would you take people to give them a true sense of the town?” I imagine there are many students out there who would rhapsodize about the glorious history of their hometowns, who would provide poetic pontifications on the importance of one such structure or another. Probably, the question was supposed to gauge our ability to write coherently and concisely. But since I could do that on just about anything, I, frankly, thought it was a bullshit question, and decided to scrap the premise altogether. *You wanna know Economy?* I rhetorically, asked them, *Then you need to get to know the people.* Screw the monuments or parks, if we even really had any. My high school boyfriend, now a successful engineer, nonetheless had a moment of social-science insight and clarity when he told me once that our

hometown, “Throws its arm around your shoulder, hands you a beer, and tells you ‘This is your life.’”

I ended up writing in the essay that I would introduce them to my family and friends because no single statue or establishment could provide a real feeling for the area. My adviser wasn’t happy about this; “Pick a bridge or something, that’s what they want to hear,” she said. I refused, stubborn as I am, and submitted the essay anyway (though, as you’ll see later, her random choice of “a bridge” is quite ironic). What she didn’t understand, and what few people do, is that not every place fits into the easy categories: cities, suburbs, small towns, exurbs, whatever. Some places are nothing but the personalities in them, bars and homes and churches scaffolded by the uniqueness of the people. My “big city” friends, and even those suburbanites will really just never get what it was like to grow up in Economy, Pennsylvania in Beaver County. Everyone laughs when I say the name of my hometown (and yes, my mailing address was “Freedom” but at least I’m not from “Intercourse, PA”) so it’s easier at this point to just respond with a succinct, “Pittsburgh” when I get the “Where are you from?” question. Pittsburgh is about twenty miles north of Economy, making Economy theoretically geographically able to be a suburb, but western Pennsylvania is just not that kind of metropolitan area.

Instead, we like to play hard and fast with our distinctions between cities and small towns. It gets a little trickier when deciding whether or not something is a “town” or “rural,” though to use a nice mainstream phrase, according to the *New York Times* my hometown is a “rural hamlet” so there you have it. I guess to get a little more specific about the kinds of people who live there, I can keep going with their article, which explored who we were voting for in the 2008 presidential election. The author says:

“But to walk the back streets of the Beaver River mill cities — the biggest mills were long ago shuttered — and to visit rural hamlets like Economy and Hookstown is to hear more than a few Democrats saying they intend, however reluctantly, to support their party’s standard-bearer, particularly as the world economy cracks and heaves” (Powell).

Do you see what he did there? It’s true, the mills are long gone and yes, to hear my grandparents talk, you would think it nearly unimaginable to be a Republican in those parts. The sneaky thing is when he says “however reluctantly,” because, you know, we’re poor and have no industry to speak of, so we’re all totally racist. Some of us are. My

grandparents and I got into many a spar (going back to when I was as young as nine or ten) over their telling me to avoid “colored” people. This clash must have been brought about by some Black History Month lesson, perhaps a kindly homage to Martin Luther King Jr. which incited me to tell my grandfather off. Saying that colored people were criminals was *not nice*, told him. Yet, this is still many an outsider’s impression of us, that comforting tale of how it’s those backwoods hicks responsible for racism, making it the most common introduction to my people. But seriously, is it not fairly obvious that times are a’changing when a ten-year-old speaks up to an old bigot?

Part of this racial divide comes from the geography of our setting. For those who have never been to Pennsylvania, New York, West Virginia, or similar states, the landscape is a bit of mystery especially if you’ve only ever looked outside and seen flat land. We’re in what I suppose could be termed “Appalachian foothills,” and as kids we muddied ourselves up rolling down the hills in our backyard enough times to tell you that’s an accurate description. Sure, Pittsburgh looks like a city, albeit unique for its three river meeting point and “City of Bridges” nickname, but the surrounding areas are a muddy, windy, verdant haven for people who want to avoid having to trim their lawns by simply hiding their houses behind a bunch of trees where no one can see you. You have never *really* given directions to someone until you’ve explained where you live in Beaver County.

So—lots of hills, lots of hidden houses, and certainly those rivers from Pittsburgh go snaking through our hamlets as well. Such is the case with my local school district. Economy is part of the Ambridge Area School District, which headquarters in Ambridge, PA, named for the American Bridge company, which built the eponymous bridge and brought lots of money to the area. Ambridge connects up with Economy quite seamlessly (you may have a hard time telling them apart) but Ambridge is located along the Ohio River, where, as the *Times*’. Powell was so kind to point out, we had a lot of luck locating steel mills.

The Ambridge Bridge serves, as well, as a dividing point. On the “Ambridge” side of the bridge, you have lots of ethnic whites, your Poles, of which I am half, Italians, Greeks, Russians, etc. On the other side, in one direction, you have “the black” as an

interview subject in Powell's article refers to them. Unwittingly, the man has succinctly projected the attitudes of many Ambridge-area residents on their neighbors of color (mostly from Aliquippa). His ungrammatical usage of the article "the" demonstrates the literal othering that occurs in this area. My grandmother lives on the other side of that bridge, in Hopewell. My grandfather was actually from Aliquippa, before it became "so colored" as they would say. She lives on the part now that houses more established working-class families, who can trace their family histories back much further back in US history than my own. Down the Ohio River Boulevard, in that direction, is a working-class, "white" neighborhood called Coraopolis, where my father grew up.

As such, I was allowed to visit my grandparents, no problem. We probably didn't as often as we should have, but we could do it whenever. To cross over into Aliquippa was forbidden. While most residents just didn't do it, or, in the event that it was necessary, slyly locked their car doors when they crossed the border, my grandmother was explicit about not crossing into the nonwhite zone. "Don't drive through Aliquippa," was her warning to us, before waving us along with a Catholic gesture of blessing. Still today in a recent discussion with my first cousin who apparently owns a gun and carries concealed, I wondered aloud in what situation one would need to carry a gun in western Pennsylvania. "You know—if I'm walking through Aliquippa at night or something..." was his response, which required no further explanation. One needs to be armed when crossing into the nonwhite zone. When crossing that bridge. What my college adviser didn't understand was that the bridge would never help you understand the people; you had to get to know the people before you understood the bridge.

The only other thing I can really say about my home, to use a fact that is definitively agreed upon by every resident—it's boring. I've literally never met anyone in my life who argued otherwise. High school students freely admit to smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol, or engaging in similar scandalous behaviors because "there is nothing else to do." Even lifelong residents admit that there is nothing exciting about it, saying it is simply "home". The sense of being stifled, of suffocation and entrapment, of being caught forever in one of the valleys of those foothills, endlessly slipping back down the

mud—unless I was clever enough to find the alternate way out—was even worse for me, because I didn't have a car. If you know anything about houses out in the woods, you know it's damn difficult to get anywhere (if there's anywhere you *want* to go) without driving. The best option for entertainment is Cranberry, a nearby commercial center that boasts such exciting outings as Wal-Mart, Target, a movie theater, Barnes and Noble, and, naturally, Eat n' Park, a local (inexpensive) chain, diner-style restaurant. Economy had a population of about half what it has now when I was born, earning it more strongly the "rural" label. It is now increasing, as are the sizes of the houses, because of its proximity to Cranberry, which in turn is closer to Pittsburgh. The Ambridge area's prime local businesses though, are bars, with churches being the second most popular hangout spot.

The encroachment of Cranberry has brought with it middle-class condescension and some tension to the area. Unable to rely on the physical, natural borders that maintained the division between the working-class whites and the black population, Economy now finds itself engaging in non-reflective, inter-class in-fighting. The town must do this all without the useful insults of the language of racism. Thus it is currently enacting a surprising battle, the old residents like my family, who were used to this quiet haven, hidden away from the bustling, stressful business of the city, versus the new, wealthier, would-be suburbanites, who sought a quiet haven, hidden away from the crumbling inner-city schools, their darker-skinned neighbors, and the petty drug use and crime that comes with poverty, so famously the cause of many a middle-class, white family's paranoia. For these new residents, Economy was all of this with the added bonus of rock-bottom real estate costs. Up popped their middle-class ticky-tacky towers, glaring down at the rest of us. Since they're all white, both teams, the newcomers have to just wait out the old, who cling desperately to some tradition and attachment to the area. Eventually an increased cost of living and cultural divide will force out the hicks.

For now, though, the area is still largely controlled by the old guard, of whom my family was a perfect representation. My education started at home—started, of course, before I was born, with my parents meeting. I love this story, if only for its ordinariness,

a love story, Beaver-County-style, the age-old cocktail of youth, alcohol, recklessness, naiveté, gender roles, and inevitable poverty, served up nightly in bars across the towns. My mother, a twenty-year-old with a fake ID, sauntered up to my 26-year-old father in a bar, proclaiming, “That drink smells like a Christmas Tree.” She was referring to the juniper scent wafting from his surprisingly top-shelf Tanqueray and Tonic, a clever quip to initiate a lifetime of shared heartache and happiness, that relative of all relative words. Her introduction to herself sounds like something I would say, if my meeting men depended upon standing out from the smoke clouds of a dive bar. They were married at St. Stanislaus, the Polish-Catholic church in Ambridge on August 31, 1985, the same church my mother was baptized in and my grandparents married in. My grandmother, my *babci* claims her father helped to build the church. Considering the number of newspaper clippings saved from the day, “Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Kolenda¹” were very happy to “announce the engagement of their daughter, Rose Ann, to Rick Moyer, son of Marita Weiss and William Moyer”.

My mother was actually a highly educated woman, for the area and for the time, having completed an associate degree before marrying my father, but she didn’t leave home until they moved into their home they purchased together after their wedding, as traditional Polish-Catholic rules dictated. My father was from a more “liberal” Methodist family, the son of divorced parents, and from Coraopolis, with a family that we can trace back to the Civil War. He signed off the rights to his religion (of which his personal practice was next to nothing) by marrying my mother in a Catholic church. What my parents didn’t know when they began their own family, was that the comforts of their blue-collar childhoods would not be replicated in their children’s lives. Both of their fathers were union workers, in the booming steel mills, and for Duquesne Light. There were no unions for waitresses or electricians in increasingly monopolizing corporations. The class divide would be more visible for these kids, their futures more uncertain, instability a regular life companion.

¹ Most of the names in this study are real, including family members and friends. I have used pseudonyms where I did not get express permission to use a real name.

I was born a little over a year after their wedding, nearly named “Erica” as an excuse to call me “Ricki,” but my follow-up act, my brother Rick, got the honors. I was named after Christa McCullough, a teacher who wanted to go into space on the *Challenger* shuttle, but was killed when it crashed, a tidbit which would probably pique some social scientist’s interest, considering my current career in education. My brother, Sean, was born when I was three, thus endowing my mother with a trifecta of terror, three children under age five, and the miserable, sinking feeling that this would certainly one day adversely affect her sanity.

Our dazzlingly average family was complete. My mom worked my entire childhood, and still does, as a waitress, because we needed the money and because I’m sure we weren’t that fun to be around all day. My father was employed by Economy Electric as an electrician until their divorce. My father’s mother, my grammy, watched us most of the time, and often took us on trips to the dollar store where I was allowed to pick out a book. My brothers, being blessed with two similarly-aged male cousins (my father’s brother’s children) were always enjoying the great outdoors of heavily wooded homes, while I preferred to mimic my grammy, who was always reading romance novels. I am fairly certain that no one explicitly taught me to read before I entered kindergarten—at least no one admits to it. If they had, however, I am sure that my grandmother wouldn’t have allowed me to read those descriptions of heaving bosoms over her shoulder. While my brothers played outside, often re-enacting Cain and Able-esque battles on the baseball field, competing for my sports-loving father’s attention, I quietly slipped into my room and entered worlds where things were more exciting, to me, than they were at home. Rick didn’t earn the nickname “Dirt” for nothing, nor did I get chastised for being “too quiet” for naught.

My mother has a favorite story that she tells about me. It provides not only a representation of me as a young child, but also the ways in which she, as a mother, has known all along what I would become. I don’t know if she thinks of this story as a way of demonstrating that she molded me to become a certain person or if it’s merely indicative of some innate characteristic she feels proud to have passed on in her genes. In any case, she loves to tell this story. It goes like this:

I am a little girl, pre-kindergarten. My mother wanted to take me outside so she could enjoy the beautiful day, Rick toddling ahead, Baby Sean on her hip. “Krista,” she said, “Pick a toy to take outside to play.” Without hesitation, I slipped into my room and emerged with a book. Hearing her tell this story today, you can see the proud expression on her face that she must have worn that day. I don’t think she would have been disappointed at all had I literally followed her instructions and came out with a doll or a game to play. But, I think my unprovoked response of choosing to spend a nice day reading was something she knew at the time to be exceptional. My subsequent success in school has only confirmed what she recognized then to be the makings of a daughter who would live a different life than hers—she could see the genesis of her American dream.

As I said, I don’t know how I learned to read, but I definitely knew how prior to kindergarten. I learned in a later literacy course that some children are referred to as “spontaneous readers”; they pick up books and “somehow” crack the code and get the story. This would probably be received by advocates of gifted education as proof of my innate skills. Of course, the narrative is disrupted by the rest of my life, where I don’t match any traditional depictions of children with inborn literacy abilities. Because of this interest in reading, somehow, I got enrolled in a book club that sent books monthly on various nature-related topics—cats, dinosaurs, insects, rocks. My mother thinks a distant family member signed me up for it for Christmas. I still will never forget the joy that came from seeing the book-shaped cardboard box in the mail—addressed to Krista E. Moyer at that—anxiously waiting to teach me new things. I shouldn’t pretend to be completely innocent about this. If I recall correctly, my random amalgamation of knowledge from these books caused me to become a bit of a snob. “Did you know...?” would begin inquiries to my relatives, and when they inevitably replied, “No,” I couldn’t stop myself from feeling like I had something they didn’t, something awe-inspiring, particularly when I would overhear family members discussing my intelligence.

Anticipation rising, I would show my mom the book I had gotten in the mail. Without fail, each time the new book arrived, she would immediately confiscate it: “Go clean your room, and then you can have it.” Certainly, this angered me every time, but I

didn't view it as anything out of the ordinary. My mother used any carrot or stick she could to get me to clean my room. Even now, in my twenties, I refuse to have a tidy apartment, undoubtedly as part of my ongoing rebellion against my super-ego and ingrained maternal expectations. This continued my whole life at home with my family. When my father was in the house, in the unique, father-daughter alliance that gives rise to daddy issues everywhere, he used to devise methods to help me clean, slyly. We'd hide things under the bed or throw things into the back of the closet. I developed a bit of a reputation among my friends for having a terribly messy room.

Additionally, I hadn't yet internalized my mother's "cleanliness is next to godliness" mentality, which I interpret now as an assertion that, despite the cramped quarters for a family of five, despite the worn furniture, and certainly despite the utter lack of middle-class amenities, damnit, my mother was going to at least have a clean house. Most famously, my mother refused to sign my admission payment papers to the Pennsylvania State University *until I cleaned my room*. Unfortunately, I must indeed recognize that my continuing rejection of this ethos is part of my newfound class privilege. It is now known that "Krista is a messy person," rather than extrapolated as, "*Those people are dirty.*"

So, up the stairs I went, to spend hours wallowing in self-pity. There is no task I hated more than cleaning my room, and I never managed to do it well enough. But, when I finally did, no doubt after many hours (or what seemed like many hours to a child) I would be rewarded with the book. My mother, perhaps unconsciously, was grooming me for a hard truth of life. Reading is such in a working-class family—a reward, a frivolous, leisurely end to the real hard work of life, physical labor. At some point, family members finally began to catch on to the importance of reading to me. I suppose they eventually realized that I had to have been reading the same books over and over again. I was never without a book and the lack of library excursions had to have meant my supply was limited. And oh, did I read *those* books. The books for poor people. Popular fiction. And my favorite was R.L. Stein's *Goosebumps*. They were cheap, maybe around \$3 at the time. Since Grammy was buying them for me—weekly!—I didn't have my mother's pre-

requisites for cleaning in order to have them. Grammy was a single woman, working in food preparation at Eat n' Park. She lived in a trailer park near our house. She must have been really proud of me to spend that money so frequently.

Years later, I learned of the *utmost importance* of having a literate home. Friends of mine who work in education lament the lack of parental involvement in the development of literacy in their children. In teacher training classes, I was taught to judge parents who didn't read to their children as inferior. Of course, this was not explicit—I was overtly instructed on the *cultural* differences that made middle-class homes bastions of words and endowed the children they produced with survival skills in schools. I was told to be mindful of these things. To be respectful that this was a *difference*. But the value judgment was always there, in the unspoken words of the wordy middle-class university classroom.

I knew it was wrong. I internalized the frustration, found fault in myself for not sympathizing with what were ostensibly well-researched, valid findings on families like my own. They were wrong, though, because these “non-literate” families were not hostile to books and words in the way the researchers thought they were. I wanted for books, and I received them. My family, however, was not going to forsake their culture for another and indulge me without question in the world of words. Reading is an isolating activity, and I was not to become an island unto myself, an oasis of intellect in an ocean of sports and backyard barbecues and hunting and all other working-class hobbies. Rather, I was subtly being integrated between the two, supposedly opposing worlds. I could read and read and read—as long as I had the back-up, practical skills of knowing and appreciating the importance of labor. This was to be the last of my seamless blending of learning and working. It was now time for me to start school.

2.

When I started this project, I set out to record, as best I could, the educational anecdotes that had led to me becoming a graduate student in critical literacy education, rather than, say, a waitress like my mother, or a home maker like my grandmothers. Once

those stories were on paper—objectified—they were now objects to be studied, rather than parts of my consciousness or of my identity. Barbara Kamler, in her book *Relocating the Personal* describes this type of autoethnographic research, noting, “The act of writing creates a space of representation where the personal is written and rewritten, but not confused with ‘the person’” (71). In this way these stories are about me—but their representation here makes them an object of study as well.

I took some time off from the project and came back to the stories later, having done additional research in the field. With these analysis chapters, I try to address the underlying themes of my education, the ways in which they relate to critical educational theory today, and perhaps, to elucidate any lessons that can be learned from my experiences for the teaching of working-class students today. It is important to remember, however, Kamler’s warning about my perspective on my own history and critical literacy, when she notes “All stories, including stories of pedagogy, are partial; they are particular rather than general, they represent a perspective, a way of seeing that is complex and multifaceted, rather than universal. This is inevitable as all writing involves a politics of selection” (174).

My own recollections begin with an introduction to the sentiments that people like me experience upon returning home to a predominantly working-class hometown, one where the people, who were once just like us are now encapsulating an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. The sentiments I felt during that walk were real, and I used them as an introduction to my story of education because I felt it addressed the central question of this work: How is it that my education made me begin to feel like an outsider in my own home? Clearly, this is a common sentiment among working-class students who have been successful in academia. Tim Lensmire regrets leaving behind friends in order to succeed academically in “Marking the Body”; Carolyn Leste Law summarizes what are probably the thoughts of just about everyone like us:

“The pride I feel in my academic and professional achievements, generously applauded by the institutions of higher education that believe they have served me, believe that I am their success story, is always tempered by the guilt I feel in having chosen a life path that has made me virtually unrecognizable to my kin” (1).

I began my story by offering a lengthy description of my hometown and the circumstances of my birth—specifically highlighting the Ambridge Bridge and racial divisions within the county, as well as the *New York Times* description of race relations and my own familial experiences of it. I find this to be a central place to start in the development of myself as an educated individual—even though it was before I began school at all. Yet, I never return to the subject of race again throughout my stories. Rather, the other subject to which I devote a substantial portion to this first section of my story, my family, is brought up numerous times throughout the text.

It is as though I felt both were formative, though one was a part of establishing my identity from the beginning, while my family's influence worked the shape and act upon my environment throughout the years. In some ways, I am reminded of Thandeka's theories on the development of a white identity, detailed in her text *Learning to be White*. I even reference the “nonwhite zone,” a term I encountered first with her text. According to Thandeka, the first victim of the white community's racism is often its own child:

“The Euro-American child...is a racial victim of its own white community of parents, caretakers, and peers, who attack it because it does not yet have a white racial identity. Rather than continue to suffer such attacks, the Euro-American child defends itself by creating a white racial identity for itself. It begins to think and act like its community's ideal of a white self. When the adult recalls the feelings and ideas it had to set aside in order to mount this defense, it feels shame. More precisely, white shame” (13).

When revisiting this text after my initial writing, I began to see more clearly the ways in which white shame had caused my own racial identity to take hold. I constantly refer to myself and my peers as “working class” or “students” and to myself frequently as female. However, I stop racial references after this initial development. Indeed, my story of my grandfather arguing with a young Krista on whether or not his racism was acceptable echoes the stories Thandeka collected of Euro-Americans articulating their first experiences in which their innate desires or learned sense of justice conflicted with the white community's ideal behavior for a white child. I did not explain the ending of the story of my argument with my grandfather—he finally shut me down by telling me I was too young to understand his point, and that I would feel the same way when I was

older—perhaps because I did not want to admit, initially that I took on a white identity in this moment and stopped arguing with him.

Thandeka goes on to argue that for most people, the adoption of a white identity does not arise from hatred or hostility, but rather a defense mechanism, a way of fitting in and preserving one's place within a white culture. I see this happening in my own schooling and family. This is not to exonerate myself from this obvious blind spot in my work. Rather, I think this is an integral part of understanding where white working-class children are coming from in their education. When I talked to a friend of mine, Jessica Flaherty, about her experiences with the Ambridge School District in order to gain some perspective on my own writing, I specifically asked about race relations. She recounted one story from her family:

“My brother lived with me for awhile because kids were beating him up. When he was transferred to Freedom school district, he had a guidance counselor personally there. Ambridge knew about the bullying. It was black kids doing it, granted, because he said some shit he shouldn't have been saying. But the black kids in that district have always caused trouble. Most of the black people at Ambridge fall into a stereotype and don't do much to climb out of it. It's almost like they are proud to be a part of a group with that reputation.”

What Jessica is talking about here was easily a common sentiment among the white students at Ambridge, which, I believe, is directly related to their position as majority working-class students. Paul Willis's ethnography *Learning to Labor* examines the development of white working-class identity in British schools, though his insights are applicable and relatable to my own circumstances. When Willis asserts that “class identity is not truly reproduced until it has properly passed through the individual and the group, until it has been recreated in the context of what appears to be personal and collective volition” he is describing the white working-class identity of Beaver County students precisely (2).

Jessica's casual statement that her brother was “granted...[saying] some shit he shouldn't have been saying” and my own failure to return to the issue of race within my day-to-day schooling speaks to the deep roots of whiteness within the community. With the white identity so firmly entrenched in all of us, Jessica can express a common sentiment that blacks are “proud to be a part of a group with a reputation” or that they behave like a “stereotype” because white identity is normative and those falling out of it

are instead *choosing* to be raced. Presumably, the black students could act white like the rest of us, but do not. I believe it is this “hidden” white identity that has led to the geographical separation within the community between blacks and whites. When white identity is not acknowledged, but is rather interpreted as standard behavior, deviation from that becomes a choice on the part of individuals to behave in a rebellious fashion.

This white identity is particularly veiled in my community (and, I would argue, for some time, to myself considering the way I wrote about this) because of the strong ethnic divisions, though these are fading with time. I specifically mention my Polish roots—the church my parents married in, the Polish moniker I use to address my grandmother—and use a quote from a news article in which a man is also highlighting the ethnic distinctions between members of the community. I do this in a way that erases my status as a white person within the community. My grandfather did not argue to me that Polish people were superior to other people—he was appealing specifically to a white identity when he condemned blacks as criminals and expected me to agree.

Additionally, Jessica’s brother was breaking the rules of the white community by saying some “shit,” which I know to mean that he was using racially derogatory language, probably completely unprompted. However, the “bullying” he got in response was still seen as an attack on white identity, rather than a reaction to hate speech. With white identity being disguised as normal, expected behavior, the blacks are then behaving “stereotypically” or *trying* to get a “reputation.” This obviously indicated the successful reproduction of Willis’s class identity—that “personal and collective volition.”

Willis speaks to the ways in which the development of this implicit white identity are important to schooling (which will be demonstrated later to be an integral part to the development of a labor force) and how it is therefore a useful tool of capitalism. He notes:

“Racial division helps, as with labour and gender divisions, to found the whole epistemological category and possibility of division. It also provides an evident underclass which is more heavily exploited than the white working class, and is therefore indirectly and partially exploited by the working class itself (at least lessening their own exploitation); it also provides an ideological object for feelings about the degeneracy of others and the superiority of the self (thus reinforcing the dominant ideological terms which make the comparison possible). Racism therefore divides the working class both materially and ideologically” (Willis 152).

Likewise, Thandeka points to the same fracturing of the working class as the aim of the development of a “white” community in capitalist society, a step away from our identification as Poles or Italians, saying:

“[T]he legal system created to support slavery was designed, in part, to split the lower classes along newly created racial lines. In fact, these laws made all members of the newly created ‘white race’ tacit or active supporters of slavery and thus established a viable means of social control of ‘whites.’ The effects of this inside job on ‘whites’ fractured the self of poorer whites, not because they were racists and thus filled with guilt but, quite the contrary, because they were not racists—or at least not so *by nature*. To learn to be a racist, this ‘whited’ self had to split off its own class interests from its racial identity. This self-fracturing process created a racial self that was its own class enemy. The white worker, now split against its own interests, felt diminished” (84).

I am lingering so long on this point for two reasons: First, I can only stress that the validity of my findings in this research and its applicability to the teaching of other white working-class students will always be in *opposition* to that of black students in similar circumstances. My own identity as a white working-class student meant a necessary splitting-off from the interests of black students, leaving them behind figuratively (in the segregation, geographically, as well as in the classroom and social circles—I had no black friends) and literally in my own writing on my education. While this split is not my fault, the dichotomous relationship between blacks and whites in the working class is, sadly, the state of things.

Second, I am unable to address black/white relations further for the reasons one of Thandeka’s subjects gives. This woman stops talking about her white identity because, she fears, “I might not like what I hear myself saying” (qtd. in Thandeka 12). I, too, fear the same thing, though I need to point out the importance of recognizing that the process of developing this white identity is done *before* schooling takes place. While I mention, hopefully, in my recounting of my argument with my grandfather, that perhaps a Martin Luther King, Jr. day at school had taught me it was *not nice* to talk about black people that way, I was still a “white” child by the time that lesson had been taught. There was no changing the identification I was already making. The best that schooling could have hoped for, at that point, was what it may or may not have succeeded in doing—getting me to act “nice,” which is not to say, out loud, the things Jessica’s brother was saying. I

also say “may or may not have succeeded” because it is entirely possible that my mother had taught me this lesson and not the school.

In this way, there is simply no place, in my opinion, for schooling to address “social justice” issues like racism when they stem so deeply from issues of identity rather than behavior practices. Rather, schools would have to completely upend the way children are identifying with their families and their peers, something that would surely be met with heavy resistance from those whose children are being lead away from the beliefs and practices that are essentially their culture’s initiation. American schooling, furthermore, has been created by and is run by people who identify with this, meaning, as an institution, it is more likely to solidify this division rather than destroy it.

I am reminded of a Facebook group I encountered one day, entitled “You know you went to Ambridge High School when...” One of the criteria was “You call the east wing of the second floor ‘Africa’...” which referred to a part of the building which housed the classroom of the one full-time black instructor, the sponsor of the African-American club and (understandably) a mentor for many black students who often congregated in her classroom during free periods. On the next line, following the ellipses, the poster had written, “...and the teachers do it too.”

This paradox or cynicism or however it can be termed brings me to the work of Paolo Freire as a way of explaining my own insistence on detailing the circumstances of my birth in the first chapter. When I was initially revising this work, I considered leaving out some of the lengthier, personal anecdotes—my parents’ meeting, my grandmother’s romance novels, my mother’s insistence that I clean my room. But, I found, I was attached to all of this detail. Some part of me found it necessary for true understanding of my home circumstances, the kind of life that the school system would have to contend with. Then, it suddenly came to me—*limit-situations*.

According to Freire:

“Humans...because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world—because they are *conscious beings*—exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom. As they separate themselves from the world, which they objectify, as they separate themselves from their own activity, as they locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their relations with the world and others, people overcome the situations which limit them: the ‘limit-situations.’ Once perceived by individuals as fetters, as obstacles to their liberations, these situations stand out in relief from the background, revealing their true nature as concrete historical

dimensions of a given reality. Men and women respond to the challenge with actions which Vieira Pinto calls 'limit-acts': those directed at negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting, the 'given.' Thus, it is not the limit-situations in and of themselves which create a climate of hopelessness, but rather how they are perceived by women and men at a given historical moment: whether they appear as fetters or as insurmountable barriers" (99).

My insistence upon describing, in minute detail, the situation of my birth and upbringing, leading up to schooling (which, in critical literacy theory, could have been the point of liberation) was representative of my own "climate of hopelessness" at the time. I stress, continually, the importance of the isolation of the community's people from each other and from anyone outside of the community, anyone who may have grown up "differently." Additionally, I felt compelled to mention the commercial center nearby, Cranberry, as the only source of consistent entertainment for us growing up.

In this way, I demonstrated the initial invisibility of the limit-situation—that of having been surrounded by people in similar economic circumstances for the majority of my life. The only chance that I would have had of seeing the "outside world" would have been through Cranberry, which, of course, was a commercial center meaning it was neatly packaged, capitalist essential propaganda. I did not see organic representations of people working in professional jobs, of the rich, or even of working-class people of different races or geographic regions. The destruction of working-class culture, local businesses, and recreation is exemplified by my statement that everyone agrees about one thing about my hometown—"it's boring." Instead, my world was self-encapsulating, except for what was deemed non-threatening entertainment.

I think nothing exemplifies the limit-situation I so laboriously describe as this section, found in the next chapter but nonetheless referential to the description of my home life:

"My hometown was so encapsulating that I never even knew I was a working-class woman until my junior year of college. My curiosity piqued by the Marxist analyses of a friend, I began to research definitions of class. The realization that, *obviously*, a waitress mother and a laborer father made me working class was embarrassing. But I knew nothing different."

Donald Graves, Jonathan Kozol, and just about every other critical educational theorist, argues for the importance of getting to know one's students. When I was in teacher school, this always seemed a vague, wishy-washy, hippy kind of

recommendation, particularly difficult for those teaching children whose parents didn't come to teacher conferences or meet with the school officials at all. It wasn't as though teachers could go into the homes of children (as Kozol often does) without probably being perceived as intrusive at best or having ulterior, criminal and deviant motives at worst.

I realized what I was trying to do here, then, with this first chapter. It is one thing to *say* I am working class. It is one thing to *say* this affected my upbringing to a degree that by the time I entered public schooling, I was irrevocably entrenched in a culture that is diametrically opposed to that of school, because of the school's basic functions. But without people being, for a short time, immersed in my world, in the world of my peers, in the way that only story and narrative can allow, there is no way to really understand the world of bars, churches, enclosed hills, sports, and literacy-free labor that gives birth to students like myself.

The limit-situation of my childhood, of being fundamentally working class with no reasonable expectation of ascending social status, having been described and objectified here, I encountered the "hopelessness" that Freire talks about upon the elucidation of the limit-situation. It is the task of the teacher-student to *re-present* the limit-situations to the student-teachers so that they may begin to dismantle them and gain control over them. It is only through this process that the oppressed can begin the limit-acts which challenge their circumstances. Initially, I had difficulty continuing on in the process of writing this paper because limit-acts seemed so untenable; I had spelled out the unlikelihood of the fruition of my American Dream, and the truth of it was staring me plainly in the face. However, I have come to realize that the depiction of limit-situations, as I have done here, by the oppressed can in fact be a limit-act in and of itself.

As a final note to this chapter, I would like to comment on the final portion of the first chapter, where I describe the literacy of my family. Law, again, remarks on the experience of being a working-class intellectual, saying "Working-class readers...suffer for it in both worlds—feeling conspicuous for reading at home, feeling shamed at school for reading the 'wrong' things" (6). Obviously, I was extremely conspicuous at home for my predilection toward reading. However, I think that what essentially amounted to free-

associating, somewhat rambling thoughts on the subject of work and labor versus leisure and reading, is actually an unconscious criticism that I have been making of both the working-class and middle-class mentalities throughout my education.

Research tells us that in homes where children aren't read to, where parents aren't readers themselves, children will experience a word deprivation that will hinder their academic performance. I do not doubt this. Yet I think that this cultural divide between the perception of the importance of reading must be addressed before this literacy gap can be closed. When I said, "Reading is such in a working-class family—a reward, a frivolous, leisurely end to the real hard work of life, physical labor. At some point, family members finally began to catch on to the importance of reading to me" I am demonstrating that it is not that working-class families are *hostile* to reading, but rather that its importance to their lives is insignificant and thus middle-class teachers and school officials will always seem condescending when shoving books into their homes.

After all, my parents, along with just about every other adult I knew growing up, felt that they got along *just fine* without reading. And didn't they? I mean, they were just like everyone else, no poorer or richer, no more or less intelligent. In fact, teachers claiming that reading is necessary—*more* important than what parents have grown up doing—is, in a lot of ways, saying that the parents' lives are deficient in some way. This is how we come to feel conspicuous; we are choosing something other than what our families have traditionally chosen to do. It is here that I will ask, for the first time, what the purpose of education is, in a classed society. Is it to allow those who are innately talented to rise up from their circumstances? But what, then, for those of us who reject innate intelligence? What is the purpose of an education if there must always be someone to flip the burgers? To wait tables?

I will return to this inquiry, particularly taking into account Freire's theories of education as liberation, with ways in which this question has played out consistently in my own life. For now, though, I will caution that, when it comes to this view of linguistically or literarily "deprived" working-class homes, I think it is imperative that educators not turn education into merely a "way out" for working-class or poor youths. Otherwise, as Laurel Johnson Black notes in her essay, "Stupid Rich Bastards," in the

anthology *This Fine Place so Far From Home*, the choice to pursue an education rather than stay in the working class becomes “about every child’s fear of losing her family and the ways in which [academia] tries to make that nightmare come true, to make it not a nightmare, but a dream, a goal” (14).

3. The Elementary Years

It is difficult to describe the sound; I have always found standard onomatopoeia to be incredibly lacking. I am small, five years old, in my family’s kitchen, bouncing a basketball off the peeling, green linoleum floor. Over and over, up, down, each time the ball escaping my uncoordinated hands. I’ve always been oddly proportioned. My legs are simply too long, my hands too big. Needless to say, figuring out how to master a basketball, and developing the hand-eye-body coordination necessary for dribbling was a difficult task for me. My mother stood nearby, surveying my progress, clearing the day’s clutter out of the kitchen. Exhausted from her nine-hour workday, she is still dedicated enough to put forth the effort necessary to teach me.

As she works, she occasionally offers tips to me. “Put your legs further apart” or “Don’t let the ball go past your belly.” I have only ever done this once before, a few days ago when we went down to the local elementary school to sign me up for Kindergarten classes. Being a nosy kid, I knew before arriving there that I would be attending Economy Elementary School. I lived in Economy, so it would be natural that I would attend this school, yet I had overheard my mother reading aloud a letter she had written to the principal of Economy Elementary requesting that I attend that school. Ridge Road Elementary was physically closer to my home, but my mother wanted me to attend the same school as my first cousin, Michael, who was (at the time) a year ahead of me. In a bizarre case of gerrymandering that I only noticed in my high school years, all of the children on my road ended up attending Economy Elementary, while those who lived at either end of the street but *technically* on Ridge Road attended Ridge Road Elementary. The logistics of the bus re-routing that occurred here, I’m sure, could only be explained by an administrator or politician.

In any case on my first day in this school—this place I was so excited to attend—I had been asked by the Kindergarten teacher to do several tasks, one of which was bouncing that basketball. My excitement for going to school stemmed largely from my knowledge that books were what you did at school. You didn't have to clean your room to go to school and read books! But, I didn't read anything when I went to sign up. I told the teacher my name, my address, my phone number, and I bounced a basketball (and failed). The verdict from the Kindergarten teacher was swift and decisive: Your daughter is not ready for school. I imagine her explaining that while I passed the cognitive tests, my physical aptitude was not yet up to par. I had to master the basic physical tasks before the end of August, or I would not be enrolled. My mother knew I could read, surely. But I was, by their standards, not yet ready. For the first time, but certainly not the last (my mother now has two children with my step-father, and this process is ongoing) my mother defected to the wisdom of experts. I was not ready.

And so she and I find ourselves in the kitchen, bouncing a basketball likely specially purchased for the occasion. The soft ground outside hardly lent itself to games of basketball, the ball sinking uncooperatively into the earth. This in-house game of basketball lurked in the back of my mind as a random, blurry memory of childhood for many years. It was odd, to be sure, for my brothers who were interested in sports were thereafter never allowed balls in the house. It was simply one of those hazy recollections among many of a child being made to perform a meaningless task, never adequately explained to her. In graduate school, I was suddenly able to make sense of it all. I came across research refuting former perspectives on literacy called “reading readiness.” While I read the description of this “former” way of doing things, my strange experience suddenly fit into a narrative on children's literacy.

Reading readiness advocated passing such motor-skill development milestones as walking backwards heel-to-toe or, of course, dribbling a basketball. My inability to do the latter represented, at the time, my position in the developmental stages of childhood that were pre-literate. So the ball bounced and bounced and bounced, building an unconscious resentment in me that would persist for years. If I had to do something I didn't want to do to get into school, I didn't want to go to school. If I couldn't play with my brothers

because I had to stay by myself and learn to bounce a ball, I didn't want to go to school. If I had to endure the frustration of a child unsure why her mother is so exasperated with her, I didn't want to go to school. Over twenty years later, the sound of that basketball echoing in the kitchen is still my first memory of preparing for public school.

In graduate school, studying education, I learned how weird I was in terms of people who are interested in education. A teacher informally polled an education class I was in, asking us who *hated* school growing up. My hand mechanically raised itself, like it didn't even have to ask my brain the answer. I had spent so many years loathing school that it was nearly impossible for me to even consider that I had gone into education because I *liked* school. I was dumbfounded to see that I was one of about three people in a class of nearly twenty who disliked school. The others were minority students. After this incident, I started asking around. My friends who are now college graduates, especially those of middle-class backgrounds, largely reported enjoying school and feeling that it was an overall positive experience. My working-class friends, particularly those who did not graduate from college, reported the same intense hatred as I felt.

I had to reflect on why this was the case, immediately honing in on the terrible treatment I received at the hands of my peers, most often from those I had called friends. I quickly left this idea though, knowing that it's rare for any child to report overwhelmingly positive social interactions in school. This was difficult for me, because I had never considered my education and treatment by teachers as anything remarkable, anything out of the ordinary. I suspect that, for many, it wasn't. Such is the Beaver County existence. The towns are so isolated, not only from our neighbors, from the other towns, and from the city, but also from other ideas. It is the unifying outlook on the world that makes us who we are, the result of shared experience.

In a place like this, we almost all felt the same way about school. My hometown was so encapsulating that I never even knew I was a working-class woman until my junior year of college. My curiosity piqued by the Marxist analyses of a friend, I began to research definitions of class. The realization that, *obviously*, a waitress mother and a

laborer father made me working class was embarrassing. But I knew nothing different. Suddenly I had a language for all of my schooling, the struggles I saw between teachers and students, the disparities I encountered between my knowledge domains and those of my university peers.

The world I live in now, populated by middle-class college graduates, does not find such a personal history to be commonplace, and in fact, they often express disbelief at the stories I tell. It was only then that I could move away from what was normal to me; only when I was explicitly taught the expectations of and best practices of teachers, that I could compare these standards with those that were enacted in my school. What I found, I think, is that I hated school because the way most teachers view school—as a place for learning and developing critical thinking—was never meant for me. This school was meant for those who were expected to continue on in a professional track, the profession of their parents. They needed to develop their intellect because their future careers would require a sharp mind.

Mine, however, required an ability to take direction, stay quiet, and do as I was told. Somewhere along the line, people realized how unfair it was to so rigidly divide the classes, and thought hey, maybe we should give those poor kids a chance as well. This was the way that school was meant for me. And most often, it did teach me these things. The professional track, that of gifted education, of expressly intellectual, critical thinking, was meant for the students whose parents had careers. While I was unable to see it at the time, as I reflect on my place in gifted education, I recall the careers of the gifted students' parents being middle-class professions.

Unfortunately, some of us sneak into that world and are never quite accepted. Some of us stand out as “gifted” and confuse those looking to distinguish the children neatly down the dividing line of *shut-up-and-listen* and *critically-analyze-your-world*. The division of students into mini-teachers and future laborers. Some of us, because of the lifelong effects of something as demoralizing as being told you can't go to school because you can't bounce a basketball, never get the chance to challenge our categorization. I was a lucky one, again, a shape-shifter in both worlds, a poor, high-

performing student. To me, the maintenance of this divide is more integral than people think in today's schooling. The primary culprit, at least at the elementary levels is tracking, "gifted education." Subtlety often goes completely out the window when it comes to enacting these programs. I was one of those who snuck in and paid the consequences of being poor and pursuing intellectual work.

You know that narrative out there about parents who get calls from teachers because their little one is acting out in school? And when the parent, naturally, has a talk with said child about his misbehavior in school, the parent found out it was because little Johnny was bored! Being good, pro-active parents, Johnny's mother and father *insist* he be tested for The Gifted Program, and *lo and behold* his IQ is just off the charts! How could he have been expected *not* to act out when he was being so under-stimulated? And didn't Albert Einstein fail high school math or something because of the *same boredom*? So good parents get their kids in gifted classes and get private tutors and *love* to tell that story (it's even better if the kid gets tested for ADHD before they found out he's gifted!) because it worked out *so well* in the end.

I hate that stupid story. With the exception of possibly three or four classes—ever—I was bored in my classes. I remember doing mental eye rolls at kids who couldn't read simple words on the blackboard when we were learning sight words in first grade. I impatiently tapped my foot under the table in fifth grade when our teacher explained for the *fifth* time the difference between Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens. And like any good, self-centered asocial kid, I incessantly insulted classmates I deemed of inferior intelligence in my private journals. I know boredom in school, and I have the academic record to prove I mastered it all. But I kept my damn mouth shut.

There is something instinctive about class differences in school, something intuitive, for those of us who have parents that work in factories, restaurants, construction. Some of it stems from knowing that it's awkward to write "Waitress" under the "Career" label when you fill out questionnaires about your family. Mostly it's quite visible though. The "rich kids" get to wear the clothes that are trendy. They get the

coolest toys. And, they get to make fun of you for not having those things without it being taken seriously. If kids are unsure about whether or not someone's family makes more money than them, they need only try telling on the other child for making fun of their tennis shoes: If the response is "ignore them" then congratulations (to them)! The other kid is the richer one.

I am being facetious because this is a difficult subject for me and gets to the heart of my early elementary education. Sarcasm is the most seemingly damaging (though ultimately useless) weapon of the working class for deflection. I never termed these blatant classroom differences as "class conflict." Of course, in Beaver County, I would have never known that was the source, the unmentionable difference. We internalized these reactions, this difference in treatment, explaining it away as the result of personal failings. And this is at the core of why I kept my little mouth shut about my boredom. No fidgeting, no misbehavior. Certainly no whining. I knew I had to act this way because I saw what happened to kids who looked like me who misbehaved. Their parents were called, they were suspended, they missed recess, they often were screamed at, nearly violently, by teachers and the principal. I didn't want any of that. The worst, though, would be for them to have called my parents.

My father would have cracked a beer and left my mother to handle the situation. Like the cleanliness of her house, my mother's children's behavior reflected on her merits as a mother. We were to do nothing to embarrass her or cause others to question her fitness as a parent—or accept the consequences. Once—and only *once*—I forgot to do my homework, in second grade. When I, in a panic, blurted this out to my mother while waiting for the bus, she told me that I would be punished when I got home. Her tone was enough to worry me for the entire day (tellingly, I do not remember what, if any, punishment the teacher gave me). When I got home, I was subjected to a lengthy scolding about the importance of responsibility, locked in my room and made to clean it (naturally) after which I had to write "I will do my homework" five hundred times. Or was it fifty times? Punishments are always interpreted more severely than they actually are by little minds in small worlds.

I would not have dared acted out in class. That was a transgression much greater than missing one day's worth of homework, a certain invitation to a spanking. My mother, for her part, never questioned the teachers' decisions to keep me enrolled in the regular classroom. They knew what they were doing, having college degrees and years of experience. The working-class respect for education is conveniently ignored by teacher school. Perhaps only outright worship would suffice. Either way, I knew my mother would have felt my misbehavior in class demonstrated to teachers that I hadn't been raised well enough, and undoubtedly a *phone call home* about it would have meant the teachers were judging her for that.

Nor could I expect teachers to ever view my acting out as cute or playful or endearing in any way. Not only had I seen how those other kids that dressed like me and lived in the woods got treated when they were bad, but I had toed the lines a couple of times. In first grade, my family didn't have a computer. In fact, we didn't have one for several years after that. They were scary, mysterious machines to me. And I knew one thing about them—*they were expensive*. I was nearly paralyzed with fear of breaking a computer every time we went to the lab for computer class. We were made to perform almost laughably simple tasks on the old Mac machines of the green-screen variety, like typing our names and printing them on the dot matrix printers. We even had little cards with step-by-step instructions on what to do.

I was terrified.

I meticulously, slowly followed the instructions on the card. I moved so deliberately that the teacher was already walking behind me, seeing my screen and telling me I needed to hurry up. I just *knew* I was going to break that thing if I went any faster, and there was no way my family would be able to afford to buy a new one. I persisted, and finally, moved on to the last step of the card. Something went wrong. The screen was different than those around me. Frantically, I craned my neck to see if *someone* had something similar on their screen. I raised my hand, hoping the teacher would help me. She was beginning to give orders to the students who were finishing up, telling them how to shut their machines down or what programs they could play on before class was over. I

raised my hand higher when I saw her eyes glance my way, coldly ignoring my plight. She moved on to other students, examining their work.

I waved my hand frantically, something was wrong! I might have broken the machine! I needed her help. Then I did something that I had never done before and talked out of turn. “Ms. Peterson...” I started. She turned quickly to face me and barked, “Not *now*,” undoubtedly frustrated from what was probably going to be another explanation of something simple to me. My eyes welled up, having never felt the sting of such rejection from a teacher. This, however, provoked her annoyance even more. “I don’t want to see those tears, Krista,” she said, before finally coming over to my screen and closing the program without bothering to tell me what went wrong. “I hate school,” I thought to myself.

Two years later, I was still a model student. I can say with utmost certainty that I was a well-behaved child in this classroom. Of course, one must always admit to a desire to represent oneself in the most flattering light possible, but I have the documentation to prove it! My “Comprehensive Evaluation Report” on my mental abilities in elementary school notes about little Krista: “Her behavior is no problem in class.”(4) Because I was so quiet and non-disruptive, my teacher was convinced I was depressed due to my parents’ divorce. She convinced my mother to seek counseling for me because I was so “withdrawn,” which she did, and the counselor attempted to refer me to a psychiatrist for medication before I threw a fit and didn’t let my mother take me. Presumably, my intellect was pathological. Most definitely, I gave this teacher no reason to dislike me or suspect me of anything bad at all, in fact, I gave her and nearly all my elementary school teachers *nothing* at all, except the bare minimum, and was rewarded with perfect grades.

For some bizarre reason, we switched classes with the other third-grade class, in a confusing attempt to get us used to switching classes in junior high, four years away. So we were taught science by the other third-grade teacher, in her classroom. One day, a pretty, blond girl from the other class whose mother came to all of the PTA activities said that someone had stolen her animal collectible cards from her desk when we switched classes. My classroom teacher asked if anyone had it, and when no one spoke up the issue

was, seemingly, dropped. Now, I had a pack of animal collectible cards, which were totally awesome for a nine-year-old aspiring veterinarian. But, being a naïve child, I thought nothing of it.

Several days later, during free time which we were given if we finished our work early, I was playing with my cards, sorting them by mammals, reptiles, etc. when Mrs. Samson came over. “Oh,” she said loudly, looking at me, “Animal cards?” she asked, suggestively. “They’re mine,” I stammered out, not used to trouble. “My mommy bought them for me.” Mrs. Samson took my cards away for the day so the teachers could prove that they were mine and not the blond girl’s. I came home in tears, explaining the situation to my mother. This story is not remarkable to me because it happened, as I have become fairly accustomed to some level of unjust assumptions being made about me. This is, after all, the same teacher who told another girl to stop braiding my long hair during story time, as we sat passively listening on the floor, because “You never know who might have lice.” The girl audibly “*ewww!*”-ed and dropped the purportedly contaminated locks. Something, whatever it was, was wrong with me—that I knew. I was inherently bad.

Instead, I remember this incident so vividly because of my mother’s reaction. I am not sure if it was because she was feeling overly sensitive about this sort of thing, being that she and my father were going through a divorce, and that maybe made her look bad to people. But normally, she would take this sort of thing out on us, saying I should have had the good sense to not play with the cards in front of the teacher and how terrible it was that I embarrassed her. It is through interactions like this that I learned the properly subservient working-class behaviors.

But not this time. My mother stormed out of the living room as soon as I finished the story, snatching up the cordless phone on her way to her bedroom. The door slammed shut, and I sneakily slinked over to eavesdrop. I heard her coolly asking to speak to my teacher. Without so much as relaying what I had told her, she immediately began snarling at Mrs. Samson, “*I bought her those animal cards! How dare you take them away from*

her like that? How dare you accuse her of stealing? I expect you to give those back to her with an apology tomorrow!”

I ran away from the door before my mother emerged from her room. She didn't mention the incident again. The next day, Mrs. Samson brought the cards over to me and quietly apologized. By the end of the day, it was even discovered that the blond girl's cards had indeed *not* stolen but were merely buried underneath too much junk in her desk. Both teachers then apologized “for thinking anyone might have taken them.” I thought to myself, “I hate school.”

My mother thinks I get my spunk and loud mouth from my father, who was known for yelling and being crass. She prides herself on knowing “how to behave” and for being such a good, friendly, waitress that she has made lifelong friends of customers. When I briefly worked in the service industry in high school, she was dismayed that I would often not respond with a smile when soccer parents treated me badly at the snack bar, or that I would openly insult them to my brother, who also worked there, after hours. What she doesn't know, though, is that the time I got accused of stealing, of breaking the rules, and she stood up for me—that is where I get my attitude and my sense of justice.

People like us spend our entire lives deferring to the wisdom of those who are more educated, who make more money. We are used to nearly groveling to them to get what we need. But in the moment, my mother proved to me that she had a breaking point, that there was a certain level of injustice that she would not tolerate. It just happens that mine is a lot lower than hers—but she ultimately taught me that it was alright to act on that sense of fairness. That story of the gifted child, versus my stories, are the politics of class in the class in action. Despite bringing home perfect report cards, never receiving a detention, I was never recommended for gifted education. Neither were many of my friends. The slightest, most insignificant transgression was swiftly and harshly punished. By the end of elementary school, I had learned the lesson that girls like me were not rewarded with good grades for being *smart*, but for following the rules. It wasn't until I did something downright extraordinary for a kid my age that the teachers started to take notice. Until then, I was firmly on the shut-up-and-listen side.

I was never that misunderstood genius.

What extraordinary thing did I do as a fifth grader? Perhaps the best thing about what happened this year was that it was so organic for my classmates and I. We didn't do it to get attention, to get into the gifted program (my partner in crime, Nikki, was a similarly high-performing working-class student, and we had resigned ourselves over the years to not being gifted material—we often joked that we didn't even actually *want* to be in it). It started simply by having fun with friends, bouncing ideas off of each other, and being creative; the difference was that we had a teacher who gave us the freedom to act on our ideas. I'll defer to the experts for the big reveal—again, from the “Comprehensive Education Report”:

“Mr. Sawyer, Krista's teacher provided input into this evaluation. He indicates that Krista is very verbal. She has constructed a complete fictional society using members in the class. The fictional group actually raised money for the Share-A-Christmas Program (5).”

I haven't the slightest idea what possessed us to do this beside the fact that it was fun to make up the characters of “Rusty's Home Supplies,” a “home improvement” store that sold sub-par home supplies (Make of this what you will, but it was around this time that my father lost his job at the local Economy Electric; it folded, and he went to work at Lowe's Home Improvement in a much lower paying, lower-prestige position). Rusty's Home Supplies featured ads in the classroom that parodied advertisements for home improvement and offered day care “dinosaurs” that poked fun at Barney, positing the caregivers as insincere and playing a role for show. The adults in dinosaur costumes smoked cigarettes and drank cheap beer and rolled their eyes at the kids, like our dads. We published newspapers, drew pictures, and wrote a magazine, a calendar, and short stories, all of which demonstrated a clear understanding of the nature of parody, the genre of advertisements, and of media in general. Finally, we even wrote a movie featuring these characters.

I think that year was fascinating. I hardly think of it as a grandiose demonstration of my innate mental superiority. Rather, I view it as an absolute triumph in teaching. The stories became progressively more complex, more interesting, more subtle, as we

continued to write them and received positive feedback from our teacher. The sheer volume of written material we produced during this time is astounding, and still rests in a box in Nikki's father's basement, a musty memorial to a time when learning could involve an entire class of students cooperatively working to improve their writing abilities, to learning that was inclusive of everyone, rather than demonstrating intelligence by exclusion, by outperforming others. I don't remember the teacher ever deviating from his standard lessons, but rather than filling every single moment with "instructional" material and busywork, he noticed we were creating this society and gave us time to develop it further. I have never had a teacher since then who was so attuned to students' interests that he allowed us to essentially create our own curriculum. A graduate student follower of Donald Graves could have observed that classroom and found her dissertation practically writing itself. Or rather, being written by us students. This, certainly, was prior to the era of No Child Left Behind and rigid standardized testing.

It was this spirit of unity that spawned the fundraising. I don't know why we started it, exactly, other than to see if we could. I like to think, now, that we were having so much fun in our learning, every day of school being something to look forward to, that we wanted to share our joy with others. We began to encourage students to donate extra change to "help the poor" as part of a Christmas fundraiser that, ostensibly, was run by Rusty's Home Supplies the store. I somehow became in charge of the envelope the money was going into, and we kept it at school; there was no skimming off the top by any parties involved. The honesty was almost awe-inspiring. Eventually, Mr. Sawyer caught on to the idea and supplied a large water cooler jug. We began to place our change in it every day.

Finally, the money was donated to the Share-A-Christmas program, which raised money for underprivileged children at Christmas, I believe, who were local. Again, the myopia of Economy Borough—we, certainly, were not the underprivileged children ourselves. Later, we held another fundraiser, enjoying the success of the first, this time donating our used toys and other items and then auctioning them off to other kids in the

school. We donated the money back to the school to buy new computers; we were still operating off of those old ones that had reduced me to tears four years earlier.

After all of this, my mother went in for a parent-teacher conference. Naturally, she was dedicated and planned time off of work for this meeting. She had gone to many parent-teacher conferences before, for me and my brothers. The usual reports of “everything is fine, her grades are good, no behavior problems” that typically sent her on her way quickly and made the meetings virtually pointless were not to be found this time. Instead, Mr. Sawyer explained to my mother that I was one of the most impressive, creative students he had ever had—in over thirty-five years of teaching. He complimented her on having raised such a daughter. Feeling encouraged by the kind words of this teacher, who seemed to think her daughter was so special, she asked, bewildered: “Why hasn’t she ever been tested for GATE?” She was referring to the Gifted and Talented Education program at the school. The sneaking, though always suppressed, suspicion of hers, that five years of nearly straight As should have been considered “gifted,” finally made itself known. Mr. Sawyer’s response was unequivocal: “Because you haven’t bitched loud enough,” he said.

And so, Rose Ann began to bitch. The “Comprehensive Evaluation Report” is the result of my finally getting tested for gifted education. It contains data on what should have been obvious to anyone—that if they felt it necessary to distinguish children based on intellectual ability, I certainly should have qualified from much earlier on to be considered one of the “gifted” ones. Looking at an evaluation like this is an exercise in smug self-indulgence, in confirming everything you ever thought about yourself but never saw recognized by others, in vindication. Or at least, that’s what the experience was for me. For others, with less dotting descriptions, I am certain it can be devastating. I think, universally, it is bizarre to see oneself represented as pieces of data, plots on a graph, as an object of study.

The Report contains such flattering praise as, “Krista is very interested in reading and writing. She is very creative when it comes to the stories she writes. She needs to be more challenged in this area,” noting that my reading level is equivalent to “end 12th” grade (6). My mother weighed in on it, of course, as did my teacher, whose comment that

I have a “keen sense of humor” still makes me smile. The Report is certainly not entirely composed of such qualitative data, with additional reporting on my scoring very highly on the sacred indicator of psychometrics, the untenable but somehow measurable representation of *g* intelligence, spatial relation skills— “very superior and a strength” (7). Additionally, seemingly random biological details show up, reminding the reader of the inherent objectification of these sorts of measurements. I am reminded of being, “the product of a full term, uncomplicated pregnancy and birth” as well as the fact that “She wears corrective lenses” (9). Disturbingly, it is reported that, “Krista was also observed in the cafeteria. She interacted well with her peers” (10).

This little child research project ultimately concludes, “Krista does meet Pennsylvania Standards and Regulations to be considered an exceptional student, mentally gifted. A Gifted Support Program may help meet Krista's academic needs” (11). This evaluation took place over the summer, after fifth grade. When I entered sixth grade, I knew things were different. I struggled, at first, in gifted education. I sensed I wasn't accepted by my peers, because I wasn't. As an adult, my best friend Stephanie who was also my college roommate, but at the time was an acquaintance, informed me that she and others, who had been in GATE were annoyed at those of us who were accepted in sixth grade, for the measly one year remaining in elementary school. She told me they talked openly about how we were dragging down standards, though probably it was more in the language of sixth-graders: We were stupid and only let in because “they” felt bad for us. Nonetheless, peer acceptance was not a prerequisite for being viewed as gifted, and I now had the key to the other side. The label opened those figurative doors we poor folks are always throwing our weight against.

Of course, several of the episodes in the story of my education do not unquestioningly make teachers look good. As a teacher myself, now, this is sinful of me. But teachers are not special exemptions from the society which produces them. I know that it is politically correct to say that teachers are special—that they are molding the minds of today's youth out of some kind of unique benevolence, some special gift of patience and social awareness. This is the liberal view of teachers. As a radical, I reject this as silly and naïve. I support my opinion with my own experience, not just as a

working-class student, but also as someone who became an educator. I don't do this because I'm benevolent. I certainly don't do this because I'm any more patient than most people. I personally identify as rather impatient, especially in the face of bold ignorance.

Liberals have created this depiction of teachers to combat the conservative denigration of them, where they are viewed as instruments of the state, indoctrinating children with commie ideas or whatever. I think most teachers do it because it's a job that they enjoy. It works for them. Undoubtedly, there is an element of satisfaction that comes from "helping children succeed" (whatever that means) but I doubt that it's more profound than the satisfaction many people who like their jobs feel. Furthermore, I think there are many teachers who do not like their jobs at all, but saw no other option for them. It is possible that they were once working-class students themselves, growing up around steel workers and waitresses and cashiers and cleaning ladies. Perhaps they thought the only middle-class job available to them was teaching. Or maybe they were middle-class incarnations of the adage *Those who can't do, teach*. Whatever the case, education and teachers are never universally positive experiences for children, and I refuse to pretend that they are.

For all the pain the prejudicial behavior of my teachers brought me, for all the setbacks when I could have been *working hard!* like a good student, I can easily say that none of that compares to the experience of having Mr. Sawyer as a teacher, and others like him. The truly radical potential in education comes not from glorifying teachers, but from teachers discarding those dividers in their classrooms. They may be products of a classed society, but they need not propagate it. When Mr. Sawyer spoke to my mother in her own language, acknowledged frankly the systems in place, encouraged her rebellion against them, he symbolically chipped into the dividing wall between himself and my mother, a piece of it flaking to the floor like the wood chips that dusted up the floors of his classroom when he taught woodworking to interested students. He gave me the chance to move up. To be an honorary middle-class student. My path was switched that year, but ultimately, for what? I still didn't know for many years, through junior high and high school. I didn't—couldn't—acknowledge the special chance I had been given. Even

then, what would become of the other members of Rusty's Home Supplies? I had to leave them behind when their parents didn't bitch enough. Why?

But I was surely too young at the time to be actually asking these questions. Instead, I accepted that I was special now; perhaps I always had been special, but now it was acknowledged and I got to brag about it and take advantage of the gifts bestowed upon special kids. School was still not enjoyable at this point, but mostly because this time period coincided with the worst time in my life, in probably all children's lives, for social interactions overlapping with the transition from childhood to adulthood, elementary to secondary. Cattiness, gossip, backstabbing, blah, blah, blah, all the usual. The worst treatment I received was from my former best friend Nikki. The closer I got to being friends with the "smart" kids, the more time I began to spend with them socially, to side with them in my view of my classmates, the worse her behavior towards me became. It was as though we were enacting on a small scale, the most petty, adolescent version of the class resentment upward mobility incites.

The forgotten result of class warfare is that those who "make it" most openly disdain their former friends. I saw a cartoon once, Soviet propaganda of the United States, in which a bulldog inherits his mistress's fortune after her death. He begins dressing like a human, runs for Senate, and scorns the other dogs he used to be friends with. The lesson, of course, is that wealth corrupts. But the cartoon drives this point home the entire time, and then ends abruptly. As sad trombones play, the bulldog is stripped of his fancy clothes, drops down to walk on four legs again, and sulks away. He was still always just a dog. And I still didn't have money, but I thought I had some new kind of power. To my people, I was becoming a real teenaged bitch.

4.

My chapter on my elementary years largely conveys my compulsion to discuss the lasting impression of the so-called "implicit" curriculum in my schooling. Kids come home from school every day and respond to their parents' inquiry, "What did you learn in school today?" with "Nothing," so breezily, because, I think, the actual facts of school at

this point are unremarkable and barely worth remembering. What sticks with us, and what won't ever be measured on a standardized test, is the lesson of society's view of us, whether we are minorities, working-class or "poor" students. This is mostly what I remember and what I wrote about and it—along with the implicit curriculum "lesson" I learned from my positive, fifth-grade experience—aligns intriguingly with current critical educational theories on everything from writing workshops to the merits of "tracking" to analyses of what causes students to drop out. And, of course, the non-Freirean elements of an "ordinary" education (as I consider mine to have been) stand out most prominently in these recollections, showing the glaring need for this sort of criticism in today's schooling.

I begin with the "reading readiness" story and continue with an admittedly very bitter recounting of what I perceived as the division between the implicit curriculum in place for working-class children ("shut up and listen") and middle-to-upper class children (the critical thinking emphasis of gifted programs), including the anecdote I have heard time and again about children being bored in classes and the resultant misbehavior being interpreted as genius. As I note, this was not my experience. "I know boredom...But I kept my damn mouth shut," I say, representing an extremely common theme of capitulation to authority figures among the working class and minorities which, I think, is at the heart of the distinction between these two tracks of education and underlines the entire problem with the theory of tracking at all.

Keith Gilyard, in his autoethnography *Voices of the Self*, describes a similar compulsion to avoid misbehavior at school or face increased punishment at home, saying:

"To get in trouble at home was bad enough, but to act up in public was the worst thing I could do to Moms. Wherever we traveled folks always commented on how well behaved my sisters and I were. Moms would usually reply, 'They had better be.' And that was the truth" (48).

How much this sounds like my own statement, "The worst, though, would be for them to have called my parents." Similarly, Laurel Johnson Black recalls of her childhood that the rich and middle-class members of her community "mistook our silence for ignorance" (*This Fine Place...* 16). Valerie Walkerdine takes this commonality one step further, arguing that this propensity toward silence in the school system

disproportionately hinders women's academic perception by teachers. She argues that the "boys will be boys" mentality allows for misbehavior on the part of boys to be interpreted positively, while the characteristics schooling desires are denigrated in girls (note how my sarcastic example of a bored, badly behaved student being tested for a gifted program used a boy instead of a girl, a fact I hadn't considered until comparing it with Walkerdine's work). Walkerdine says:

"[H]elpful children become an important part of the maintenance of calm, order, and the smooth regulation of the classroom. It is common for female teachers to fear such qualities as much as they want them. In a recent study... many female teachers openly despised the very qualities of helpfulness and careful, neat work which at the same time they constantly demanded from their pupils, often holding up the work books of such girls as examples, or reprimanding the boys for not behaving like the 'responsible' girls. Yet they would simultaneously present such characteristics in girls as a problem. Furthermore, it was common for female teachers to dislike intensely the girls who displayed them. They would describe them as 'boring', 'wet', and 'wishy-washy'. Such girls had no 'spark', 'fire', or 'brilliance'. Yet it is such girls who had become these teachers" (75).

So, while I was exhibiting the very behavior that was demanded of students of my class and perhaps more so of my gender than of boys, I was ignored for years for consideration as anything remarkable. Indeed, I include two examples where this intersection of gender and class incited hostile treatment from my teachers: My sense of empathy today causes me to be baffled at the thought of reacting to a tiny, crying, seven-year-old child in the cold, suspicious manner that my first-grade teacher did, and I cannot see what could have been so important about a girl's animal cards as to warrant such a public shaming of a child. Yet, as the above experiences of a working-class African-American boy in New York, a working-class white girl in Boston, even a working-class white woman in England, and myself all have in common, there is clearly a deeply imbedded implicit curriculum that causes the perception of who is "gifted" to be distorted by lenses of class, gender, and racial biases, which challenge the validity of the system itself.

Instead, I think that, as Ivan Illich says in his radical anti-schooling book

Deschooling Society:

"Universal schooling was meant to detach role assignment from personal history: Even now many people wrongly believe that school ensures the dependence of public trust on relevant learning achievements. However, instead of equalizing chances, the school system has monopolized their distribution" (11).

I do not mean this analysis to be entirely pessimistic though. I think it is true that, largely, my elementary school experience was heavily tied to role-assignment along gender and class lines (and to a certain, even more implicit extent, along racial lines that were already in place before we entered school, as discussed in Chapter 2). However, I provide the example of my fifth-grade teacher and the “Rusty’s Home Supplies” experience as a way in which a teacher not only openly challenged the interpretation of my good behavior and good grades as perhaps “lacking spark,” but also democratized the writing and creative processes in the classroom so as to allow all students to engage in a learning activity that was organic, student-centered, and fun.

Re-reading my anecdote on my fifth-grade classroom experience, I was struck by the similarities between my teacher’s pedagogy and the “carnival” style of writing workshop that Tim Lensmire advocates in his work *Powerful Writing Responsible Teaching*. Lensmire outlines four essential characteristics of Bakhtian carnival which he brings to his design of writing workshop: First, the “*participation of all*” students is necessary, which leads to the second criterion of “*free and familiar contact among people*.” Third, like the common perception of carnival’s nature, writing workshops should take on a “*playful, familiar relation to the world*” which includes the final element of “*profanation*” (9-11, italics in original text). This final element highlights the importance of carnival as being both “unofficial and antiofficial,” wherein the given state of affairs is not sanctioned and is, in fact, turned on its head and criticized.

When I first encountered Lensmire’s theories, I recalled the “Rusty’s Home Supplies” saga of fifth grade, a memorable, important encounter in my education which, when I embarked on this project, I felt the obvious need to include. The importance of this experience, I believe, is not just that it was fun for me and the other students or that it provided relief from the day-to-day monotony of worksheets and exams, or even that it demonstrates a successful enactment of a critical approach to writing pedagogy. Indeed, I am certain that my own writing skills, as well as those of my friends who were closely involved in the development of the Rusty’s Home Supplies mythology, such as Nikki, were improved from our freedom to explore various genres of texts and the permission to

parody any element of our lives (like Lensmire's example of students writing about farts to elicit reactions from authority figures, we too, often wrote crude stories—notably one character “Mat Fatt” was a massive pig that ran the cafeteria of the store and served up slices of his own fat to customers). When I looked at the documents again years later, my teacher's discernment for improved levels of writing noted the change in tone and diction from the stories I remembered writing at the beginning of the year as opposed to those I wrote at the end.

Rather, I would argue that the real importance of a story like the Rusty's Home Supplies year is the way in which it demonstrates how a carnival-esque atmosphere of a classroom can lead, on the part of authority figures, to the *re-interpretation of standard, ingrained reactions to children's behavior*. My recounting of the stories which dominated the beginning part of my elementary years—the basketball bouncing signifying my reading readiness, my swift, harsh rebuking for crying/“acting out” in first grade, and my presumed guilt in third grade—demonstrate a clearly defined pattern of interpretation of my behavior that aligns with the theories of the critical pedagogues I have quoted above. However, when a teacher allowed writing and creativity to overtake the classroom—not in a disordered sense, but in the free sense of carnival—the interaction of all students together forced reinterpretation.

When *all* students were involved in an activity, when *all* were freely interacting in a *playful* manner (I would argue too that many elements of our writing involved the “accidental” profanation that Lensmire sees in children's writing) there is no longer room for any official, authoritative division amongst the students. The boundaries between what was “play” and what was valid, educational activity were blurred, meaning the ability to easily say some students “obeyed” and others “disobeyed” was taken away. Likewise, boys and girls, middle-class and lower-class students all engaged in the same, inherent behavior for children—play.

Donald Graves is famous for asserting that the desire to write in children is inherent. He notes: “[C]hildren clearly understand the power and function of writing. They view writing as one way to make a point to a group of people outside their usual sphere of communication—the school” (34). As we took our writing and directed it to

influencing the outside world—via the Share-A-Christmas program, we demonstrated our savvy for exacting a change we desired to see in the world, using writing as a tool. This could not have happened without encouragement from our teacher. Additionally, Graves, in outlining his conditions for effective writing among children, stresses the importance of children choosing their own topics, and notes “dishonest writing is not good writing” (107). I would argue that, here, Rusty’s Home Supplies was unique in its ability to allow for any number of characters (what and who, exactly, cannot be found in the sprawling stores of Wal-Mart?) and for its integration of working-class culture (Rusty served as a sort of Homer Simpson-esque lovable, working-class idiot). As such, we told our stories, together, in a playful manner that enacted change on the world.

I should stress that this was not without some degree of pushback from other instructors. As I mentioned, our elementary school was in the habit of having children switch classrooms for one to three subjects as early as third grade. At the time, my science teacher was not my homeroom teacher (Mr. Sawyer) who was allowing the Rusty’s Home Supplies creativity to flourish. After showing us our mid-session grades, in which my grade was significantly lower than usual, I recall him scolding, “Too much Rusty’s Home Supplies, Krista,” and encouraging me to focus on my schoolwork instead of this “playing.” Thus, any antiauthoritarian elements to the workshop style of our homeroom class were held in check. Despite the fact the entire classroom itself took on workshop features—from the interactions of students, the choice of writing, the daily time to write, even our permission from the teacher to do our writing under desks and in strange corners of the classroom—there was always the lingering, authoritative traditional style of the school itself which prevented any real, collective critique from taking place.

I believe it is this re-interpretation of behavior, brought about by the carnival-esque workshop style of my fifth-grade classroom that lead directly to my placement in the gifted program at the school. Obviously, my teacher knew that there was some political element to it, and he may have even had expressly political motivations for allowing us to play-learn the way we did (I am thinking, specifically, of his “Because you haven’t bitched loud enough” response to my mother). After my behavior, along with the

rest of the students, became indicative not of resistance or misbehavior, but rather creativity and “spark,” I was placed on the tracked path of our school district for the so-called “gifted” students.

My objection to such programs, politically, stems largely from what I find to be an incredibly disturbing history of the type of psychometrics used to place students in these programs. In his enlightening text, *The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Jay Gould outlines how these IQ tests went from being tools to identify the mentally deficient—ostensibly to help them—to becoming the arbiters of racial superiority, amongst other convenient dividing lines for eugenicists. Specifically, I was struck by Lewis Terman, one of the developers of the Stanford-Binet scale of intelligence on which the majority of today’s IQ tests are based, who argued:

“After all, does not common observation teach us that, in the main, native qualities of intellect and character, rather than chance, determine the social class to which a family belongs? From what is already known about heredity, should we not naturally expect to find the children of well-to-do, cultured, and successful parents better endowed than the children who have been reared in slums and poverty? An affirmative answer to the above question is suggested by nearly all the available scientific evidence” (qtd. in Gould 221).

I do not need to dwell, however, on the fact that these sorts of tests have a sordid history which includes specifically seeking out data which confirms the supposed hereditary intellectual inferiority of children like myself. This is an important history, which needs to be remembered when looking at documents like my “Comprehensive Education Report” which purport to be created in order to *help* children like me (though, it seems, the people who created this document were only interested in helping me *given a specific frame of reference* for my “innate” intelligence). However, I can view my history as a “tracked” student through the data gathered on the topic by Jeannie Oakes, as well as the theoretical distinction between *true* liberation in education and the false generosity of the oppressor as outlined by Paolo Freire.

First, to address my having been tracked into the gifted program: I do not deny that I was switched from the “shut up and listen” implicit curriculum of the “regular” classroom in a school made up of largely working-class children, to the “critical thinking” career-based path, even though the actual curriculum of the gifted program didn’t seem to vary too wildly from the standard one—it was perhaps just more

“accelerated” or “in-depth” in my memory. This swapping of implicit curriculum, or future pathways, for me occurred despite the fact that I was a working-class student, so, obviously, I am not making the argument that working-class children are without exception targeted for discrimination or always believed to be intellectually inferior to their middle-class classmates. Rather, I think it is important to note the *reasons* why this sort of tracking occurs and what its implicit message is to students who are *not* tracked into higher-level, “gifted” courses like I was.

In *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, Jeannie Oakes makes the argument that the vast majority of teachers and administrators feel that tracking is a vital tool to structuring schools and classrooms because it is *beneficial to the students*. It is argued that students learn best among students of similar ability levels (6). This is “done more or less out of habit”, rather than because there is any real proof of the validity of this assertion, and because it is the habitual, “natural” way to run a school, “we don’t tend to think critically about much of what goes on” (5). A result of this tracking is, as I argued, a shift in the implicit curriculum of the school—tracking tends to change the perception of the students by other students and by teachers. Oakes notes:

“First, students are identified in a rather public way as to their intellectual capabilities and accomplishments and separated into a hierarchical system of groups for instruction. Second, these groups are labeled quite openly and characterized in the minds of teachers and others as being of a certain type—high quality, low achieving, slow, average, and so on. Clearly these groups are not equally valued in the school; occasional defensive responses and appearances of special privilege—i.e., small classes, programmed learning and the like for slower students—rarely mask the essential fact that they are less preferred. Third, individual students in these groups come to be defined by others—both adults and their peers—in terms of these group types. In other words, **a student in a high-achieving group is seen as a high-achieving person, bright, smart, quick, and in the eyes of many, good.** And those in the low-achieving group come to be called slow, below average, and—often when people are being less careful—dummies, sweatshops, or yahoos. Fourth, on the basis of these sorting decisions, the groupings of students that result, and the way educators see the students in these groups, teenagers are treated by and experience schools very differently” (3, bold text added).

This was most certainly my experience. I even recall, when our principal in high school announced that students who had not actually *tested* into the gifted program would be allowed to take the high-track courses on the basis of grades alone, he justified it saying, “You gifted kids got tested once and think you’re better than everyone else now.” A student shouted out: “We are, though.” Likewise, Oakes notes that tracking causes

students to be isolated from their peers—scheduling conflicts cause even “non-tracked” classes like gym end up full of specifically tracked students (45). While I do not need to reiterate everything that Oakes says—and she outlines, excellently, the ways in which tracking is affected by many factors such as teacher bias, test bias, and the “self-fulfilling prophecy of the normal curve. No matter what, half of the population is below the mean, below average”—it is sufficient that I correlate my experience with her main argument (11). Oakes insists that the data prove, definitively, that tracking is not helpful:

“It is clear from what we know about the development of American secondary schooling around the turn of the century and from the considerable work of contemporary researchers that tracking is *not* what it may first appear to be to the casual observer or the unquestioning student, parent, teacher, or administrator. Tracking does *not* equalize educational opportunity for diverse groups of students. It does *not* increase the efficiency of schools by maximizing learning opportunities for everyone, nor does it divide students into neatly homogenous groups. Tracking does *not* meet individual needs. Moreover, tracking does *not* increase student achievement” (40).

What is the point of it then? Why did my teachers target me? Oakes points out that many teachers and administrators will argue that tracking is important because it is *not fair* to the well-behaved students to be forced to deal with students who do not follow the rules and are largely a distraction from the learning process of supposedly more serious students—and indeed, when I went back and interviewed two of my (in my opinion) best teachers in high school, this is one of the exact reasons they provided for the purpose of the higher-tracked classes. Oakes, having demonstrated that this sort of interaction with the lower-level students does *not* affect the learning of students like myself, notes that this sort of tracking largely benefits the teachers, saying dryly, “I cannot suggest anything quite as easy as working only with the top kids” (14).

I believe the purpose of this sort of tracking is the maintenance of class and racial divisions in the face of students like myself, who, by mere fact of adopting the work ethic and behaviors of the middle class begin to be possible threats to the maintenance of class distinctions. The idea of there being high-achieving members of any group is nothing new—W.E.B duBois’s “The Talented Tenth” argues that around ten percent of any group, blacks, whites, poor people, rich people, etc. are likely to be better qualified to be leaders than their peers and should be targeted as such. However, were I to continue on in the intellectual, successful path that I was preparing myself for—and that my mother,

especially, was preparing me for—eventually I was going to hit the wall of realizing that something was amiss in the treatment of people like me. It is possible that I could even have convinced my peers of this.

Fearing this sort of liberation of thought, the oppressor engages in what Freire termed “false generosity” wherein special treatment is given to the oppressed by the oppressor. Freire says:

“Any attempt to ‘soften’ the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity. Indeed the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their ‘generosity,’ the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well” (45).

When students like me are selected from amongst their peers (after all, why me and not Nikki or Jesse, two of my good friends who contributed equally to the development of Rusty’s Home Supplies?), this gesture “softens” the power of the oppressor in the eyes of the oppressed. Something nice is being done for us in exchange for our hard work. We are almost honorary middle-class students. Similarly, it can be argued that tracking is a “generous” gesture for the students who did *not* write a movie script in fifth grade, like I did. After all, wouldn’t they feel kind of bad about themselves having to keep up with a student like me? Thus, the argument that tracking is for the benefit of students is maintained.

Like Tim Lensmire recounts sadly in “Marking the Body,” he was expressly told to leave behind the behavior he engaged in with his friend Mike—to break away from his class—and Keith Gilyard was encouraged to abandon his closest friendship, I was also symbolically and physically removed from the friendships I had developed in a gesture of false generosity. However, as Freire is careful to point out, the injustice must continue for this generosity to exist. By physically removing children from their peers, the school system continues the doling out of social roles by again proclaiming the superiority of middle-class culture—certainly the teachers were doing us “favors” by removing us from these bad influence peers—and also maintains the illusion of fairness and equality of opportunity. If some of us have made it, then, obviously, there is no bias within the system. A few may be let “in” so to speak, in order to solidify the existing structure.

5.

Secondary School and “Extra” Education

I had a lot of evidence to the contrary, but the working-class sense of inferiority gnawed at me and prevented me from fully integrating into the group of smart kids at Ambridge. I think it was generally assumed I would go to college; I can find no hard evidence that my secondary teachers ever believed I was anything but a gifted kid who would move on to a middle-class profession someday. Hell, I can even come up with a few random anecdotes in which teachers *encouraged* me, specifically, to become a teacher. In particular, after I gave a lengthy presentation on the solar system in eighth-grade science, my teacher’s only commentary was, “Doesn’t Krista just have that *teacher* voice?” while smiling beatifically and sub-textually indicating her desire to pass on the torch to me. Being perpetually paranoid, I never saw it this way, and constantly sought ways to prove myself. My greatest opportunity for this came my junior year of high school. My high school boyfriend had, the year before, confused the heck out of me by indicating his desire to attend Governor’s School (which he did), and which is not, despite its name, a school for future politicians (at least not expressly).

Governor’s School, as it turned out, was a summer program for intellectually gifted students in the state of Pennsylvania, completely paid for by the state, in particular the governor’s office, hence the name. About half of American states have some incarnation of this program; Minnesota is not one of them. In Pennsylvania, Governor’s School programs are held on campus at universities across the state. Students stay in the dorms on campus typically during the summer between their junior and senior years of high school. They are taught by university faculty and, theoretically, take college-level courses. No grades are issued, though often some kind of community service project is expected of the students at the end of the program. Program subjects range from teaching, information sciences and technologies, music, agriculture, and international studies, among others.

In any case, I was going to prove myself to my teachers (because they respected the program), to my classmates (because most of them didn’t even *know* of this program, let alone have a chance to get accepted) and my boyfriend’s family (to whom my sense of

inferiority was always the greatest; they were so much more well off than my family was.) I found a Governor's School for International Studies; from the website, I garnered that this program would teach me the foreign language of my choice, either Japanese or Portuguese, as well as other courses in things that I had a passing interest in, like Global Issues or American Foreign Policy, but I had never had any chance to explore at Ambridge.

On this superficial, showy whim, I applied. Months later, I finally heard back, via a letter — had I been a high school student with high college aspirations on my radar, I would have recognized immediately the ominous sign of a small envelope. Naively, I opened the envelope in excitement, only to read I had been selected as an alternate for the program. Should another student choose not to attend (here, I thought, who *wouldn't* choose to attend?) I would be selected to replace her. I was devastated. I felt there was no way I would be able to attend. I tried to keep the news quiet, sharing it with only a few close friends.

I surprised myself by crying when I received the phone call from the director of the Pennsylvania Governor's School for International Studies, telling me that a space had opened up for me. "Do you want to go?" she asked, after giving me the good news. "Yes," I muttered through tears. I was going. I had made it. This was *elite*. My Google searches, though largely motivated by the selfishness of appearances, had in fact shown me how prestigious this was. I got it, now. Soon, I received a congratulatory letter from the Beaver County Intermediate Unit. I had no idea what intermediate units were, but they thanked me for bringing such a distinction to Beaver County and for representing them in this program.

All of the Governor's School programs had an orientation in Philadelphia. My parents and I road-tripped across the state, and my excitement built because I was going to meet my roommate and get my class assignments. I had chosen "no preference" for the language requirement, so I'd find out which language I'd be learning over the summer. I sat through a massively boring orientation ceremony in an agricultural building, finally getting my assignments: Japanese for language, American Foreign Policy, for the elective focus course, and a girl named Lauren, from West Chester, Pennsylvania as my

roommate. My first encounter with Lauren was intimidating; she was nothing like me. Long, perfectly straightened, almost-black hair, enormous green eyes lined with makeup and long lashes. Her clothes were like nothing I saw on my friends or even the “popular” classmates. To me, she looked like someone who had stepped out of a chic New York City high rise. She spoke with an accent that was completely unfamiliar, which made her seem almost foreign to me, particularly because I had not yet begun to recognize my own. Her bubbly introduction of herself contrasted obviously with my sullen demeanor; I am so bad at small talk that I was immediately uncomfortable with her questioning. On the ride back from orientation, my mother and step-father later joked that it was probably going to be a “long summer” for me.

After move-in, we got to know each other better; Lauren explained that West Chester was “outside of Philadelphia.” It wasn’t for another few years that I would come to understand that despite introducing myself to people as originating in a town “outside of Pittsburgh,” Ambridge/Economy and West Chester are vastly different. West Chester is a wealthy suburb, contrasting with my “hamlet.” I wouldn’t have known the political and economic implications of the word “suburb” even if they had explained it to me as such at the time. We talked about our past; I found that she attended a private, all-girls Catholic school and was an only child. Her parents were still married. I was initially surprised that she and I began to get along so well, thinking our “superficial” differences would make us conflict. Today, it makes more sense. I had someone to look up to, to admire her 1500 SAT score, her beauty, her college and career aspirations, her family. She had the admiration the wealthy feel they deserve from the lower classes. Furthermore, she found amusement hearing my stories of life in the woods. I take offense, now, because I know her giggles were less about how hilarious a storyteller I am, than in the realization that *those people* really are like that.

Despite the relative ease of my social acceptance—I had been, unwittingly, pretending to be middle class for awhile now—it was significantly more difficult for me to feel comfortable in classes. I learned in teacher school that the number one factor for students’ success in a classroom is “prior knowledge.” I doubt this fact would have really brought much comfort to me at the time; certainly I would not have taken it as absolution

for my academic difficulties in the program. In short, I had no idea what was going on in any of my classes. In Global Issues, we had been assigned to read Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* prior to starting classes. I literally could not finish it. I didn't understand the wars he was referencing; I didn't even know what a Lexus was. I lacked enough understanding of free market capitalism and its cousin, globalization to understand why in the world he was arguing his tenuous "Golden Arches" theory that countries that have a McDonald's never go to war with each other. In hind-sight I can see what a bit of libertarian breeding ground this class was. In this, like all of my classes, I never once raised my hand and voiced my opinion, being in a constant anxiety of second-guessing the validity of my own perspectives. Every time that I came close to feeling confident enough to venture an opinion, it seemed another student would be called on first and would mention a politician, a country, or sociological concept I had never heard of. I would lower my hand.

If Global Issues sang the praises of globalization, the socialists-in-training among our ranks of 100 students found respite in many other aspects of the program. As part of the rigid, minute-by-minute scheduling of our days, we were frequently sent to watch videos of the evils of global capitalism, which showed the effects of economic inequities abroad, particularly in Africa. We were once sent off to do community service. Lauren and I found ourselves picking peas for a farm that grew food for "underprivileged" families. I think I can place this moment as being the time I finally acknowledged my resentment, without me fully comprehending why I felt so angry.

I felt I should have been grateful for the opportunity to help others. Helping others and teaching students to do the same (though, naturally, through politics and policy) seemed to be the overall goal of those running the program. I was not opposed to community service; in fact, I'd participated in it in various forms throughout my life. But it was hot that day. Very, very hot. This was back-breaking labor. We worked from eight in the morning until late afternoon. The people in charge at the farm harshly scolded us for any breaks we took. We were made to feel guilty for wanting to "slack off" in any way. We were called lazy and privileged. At some point, my righteous indignation began to control me and wouldn't let go.

I started purposely slacking off and mouthing off under my breath. I began to encourage others to join me in my rebellion by sitting down to pick the peas. I seethed with rage at being shamed for not unquestioningly, enthusiastically working unpaid labor. A thought entered my mind—who, exactly, *was* the privileged one here? Hadn't I, in my childhood, received benefits from similar programs like this farm? The formerly suppressed memory that my mother had received food benefits from the WIC program entered my mind and angered me. I was not lazy, and I was not privileged. Or was I? My family looked nothing like those Africans in the videos, after all...

Afterwards, all students took part in a “debriefing,” a favorite practice of the program directors who enjoyed throwing us into unfamiliar situations or misleading us about their intentions, and then gauging our reactions afterwards. Undoubtedly, this was done to mold our take-away message from the experience into the proper, liberal interpretation. Here, I learned that our group was expressly made to feel guilty and privileged. It was an “exercise” to give us perspective, they said, when I complained of our treatment. Perhaps I merely needed more time for reflection before my lingering doubts about the moral benefits of this forced labor became clear. For some unknown reason, other students had been sent to spend the day in an air-conditioned building, packaging medical supplies. I never learned how they selected who would go to which site.

The grand finale in the program was a very special dinner, which took place right after our debriefing from the community service. I suppose that having exactly 100 students in the program made it convenient for statistical representation. We went down to the cafeteria as instructed and were met with our resident assistants handing out cards arbitrarily. Some of us had yellow cards, some of us had blue cards, and some had brown cards. Most of us had brown cards; I had one. I remember it detailing some facts about how my name was [insert African name] and I was from [African country] and I had AIDS and I couldn't support my children and they were starving and I couldn't feed them because I lost my job. Phew!

After we had all received our cards, we were suddenly met with a drastic change in disposition amongst our formerly friendly resident assistants. They had us line up by

cards. About five students with blue cards were led peacefully into the cafeteria. After them, the twenty five or so who had yellow cards were shuffled in brusquely. Meanwhile, the seventy of us with brown cards were waiting outside, surrounded by hostility.

“SHUT UP!” we would hear, bellowed at us if we spoke at all. “I *said* ‘stay in a straight line!’” yelled another assistant if we drifted out of our rows. Various insults were hurled at the students who giggled under their breath. Of course, we all thought this was an elaborate joke, but even if we didn’t necessarily believe the assistants could be serious, it’s really not hard to offend a teenager into submission. Eventually, we were led into the cafeteria and pushed down onto the floor. Around us, we saw the students who had blue cards, seated to our left at a table covered with a fine table cloth, silverware and porcelain plates. I overheard a resident assistant dressed in a butler’s apron humbly asking those students if they needed anything and what they would like to eat for dinner. I overheard something about chicken and steak.

I glanced right, over at the yellow-card students. They were seated in a cafeteria-style row table, covered in a brown paper “table cloth.” I saw paper plates and plastic silverware in front of them. Nearby was a buffet of spaghetti. They looked about as confused as did those of us on the floor, but I noticed the students with blue cards settling in nicely, sipping sodas and water hand-served by the resident assistants. The yellow-card students were told they had to wait until the blue cards were served, but then they would be allowed to go to the buffet and get spaghetti. Those of us on the floor, however, were still being stung by the insults hurled at us. “Pathetic,” the assistants snarled. We couldn’t even speculate about what was going on because of the strictly enforced rule of silence for those of us on the ground.

The yellow cards were filed up to get their spaghetti, and fill their paper cups with water, leaving us brown cards even more perplexed and hungry, with the aromas of various foods filling the air. A speech was commenced after the yellow cards were seated. We were debriefed that we represented the division of wealth in the world. A tiny proportion on top, a sizeable minority in the middle, and the majority, well, literally down below. We brown cards would be fed a bowl of rice—in time. First, after reading off some statistics, some of us had to stand up. “Where’s Mwana?” the resident in charge

asked. “Stand up,” she demanded. The student holding the card named Mwana stood up. “Read your card,” she said, and the student did as she was told. Her story was similar to the one on my card. She was told that she had had a job at a garment factory, but it closed, and she had to choose between feeding her children and feeding herself. Like any good mother, she chose to feed her children. That student would not be eating tonight.

A few other students’ “names” were called; they, too, were made to recount what was on their card. Likewise, they found themselves in economic dilemmas, such as choosing between food and AIDS medication. They would not eat tonight either. I felt lucky not to be among those who were called. At last, they passed out bowls of rice to those of us on the floor who, apparently, could afford to eat tonight. We sat there, pathetically picking out chunks of rice with our fingers, trying to get some satiation. We watched those in the other groups continue to eat and drink. Some of us on the floor offered our rice to those who had been denied food that night. We were instantly scolded and prevented from continuing to share.

Then, something miraculous happened. A student broke ranks with those of us on the floor. He jumped up and grabbed a tray filled with cake that was to be served as dessert to those with blue cards. He moved so quickly, as did the resident assistant “guards,” that those of us on the floor were unable to join him in his rebellion. Cake in hand, he attempted to liberate the food and deliver it to his comrades below. Immediately, he was grabbed from behind, around the waist by an assistant. Another snatched the cake from his grasp. “*Viva la revolución!*” he shouted as he was violently wrestled to the ground by a resident assistant. Defeated, the resident assistant sat with the student, restraining him so our would-be revolutionary couldn’t pull another stunt like that. Those of us on the ground were made to witness what happened to those who acted out, and not wanting to be thrashed around like that, we sat still.

As the others finished their meals and many of us gave up on trying to eat the rice, we were yet again debriefed as to what the dinner represented. We realized, of course, that this was to provide a visual representation of the economic realities of the world. Students at the blue table were asked why they didn’t offer to share their meals. They provided no satisfactory response. “Did you use your spoon?” the assistants demanded of

them. They all shook their heads, looking down, embarrassed. There was nothing in the meal that required a spoon, though all of us on the ground could certainly have used one. “We didn’t think of it,” was all they could say to justify themselves. That—of course—was the lesson of the evening. We, naturally, were *all* truly members of the blue table, and *we* just didn’t think about it. Those who, in real life, are brown-card holders, fear the retribution that our rogue classmate received and, despite their overwhelming numbers, do not “act out” as he did. This is how economic inequality is perpetuated, and they hoped we would think about this.

We were sent back to our dormitories for the evening, brown-card holders, particularly those completely denied food, very hungry. We were allowed to go within a few blocks of the university, as part of the program’s rules, so I guess they assumed we could all go out and get dinner if we wanted, even though, technically, all meals in the cafeteria were supposed to be free for the entirety of the program. I had relied on those free meals, not having had a parent’s credit card to pay for a dinner. My Korean friend brought me freeze-dried noodles, and we shared those while I called my mother to complain. I had the anger of the earlier “community service” still stewing, and now this.

“They should have fed you,” she said. I told her that it was part of our lesson. We were supposed to see that some people didn’t have the chance to eat dinner some nights. “I don’t care,” she insisted, “You don’t teach people sympathy for other people by making them miserable themselves.” The cortisol pulsing through me told me to go with my initial, uncomfortable, pissed-off reaction and agree with my mother. But the program directors and resident assistances were so smart, so worldly, so well traveled; I wanted to be like them. So in that moment I decided my mother must have been wrong, and I just hadn’t learned my lesson yet. More reflection required.

On the last day of the program, they gathered us for a more informal chat, not really a debrief. Look, we heard, we know you’re going back to school in September for your senior year. And uh, we kind of have a problem with students going back to their regular schools and thinking they’re better than everyone else. So don’t do that. Uh, just remember that everyone is just as good as everyone else. And uh, try to help people who may not be doing as good in school as you, okay? And don’t forget your service projects.

I went back to school my senior year thinking I was better than everyone else. While my classmates spent their summer playing video games or swimming or, if they were very lucky, taking vacations, I was *learning about the world*. Despite all the anxiety I felt during the program, the resident assistants repeated a mantra to us: “You are not an admissions mistake”. Presumably, this was supposed to remind us that even if we had occasional difficulties, they picked us all because we were something *special*—we *deserved* to be there. Now, I am skeptical of this as being an inherent part of the program—that they only chose students completely and equally “worthy” of admission. I found out eventually that the Beaver County Intermediate Unit that sent me that “Thank you for representing us” letter, had done so because *all* of the Governor’s Schools had to pick at least one student from each “intermediate unit”—a division of public schools in Pennsylvania. This was a certain tiny concession to affirmative action that the state required, so as to prevent, for example, the over-representation of places like Lauren’s hometown. I think I may not have been an admissions *mistake* so much as the best they could find within my intermediate unit. An admissions liability. I am certain that had it not been for this rule of the state, I never would have attended.

I wasn’t aware of how much this message sunk in to me until my senior year of high school, when I blamed my school for all of my travails in Governor’s School. I blamed my teachers and frequently mouthed off to them, believing them to be far less intelligent than the professors who had taught me during the summer. I now suddenly possessed the brazenness of a real middle-class student. I wouldn’t shut-up-and-listen! I believed they owed me my bad attitude, for they were responsible for it by not having taught me well enough, despite my gifted courses and enrichment.

My senior year was a stupendous enactment of a self-fulfilling prophecy. I had been friends with Jenn for about five years by the time I entered my last year of mandatory schooling, but it was mostly confined to our associations in band, steel drums, and jazz band. With my older, high school boyfriend being gone, I found myself with a lot of free time on my hands. Jenn had a reputation as a rebel; she wore goth clothing to school her freshman year, she stayed out late and seemed to follow no rules. The biggest

distinction between the two of us, though, was that I was a straight-A student, and she was known as a slacker among some teachers; Ds and some Es (our school's failing grade) were no stranger to her report cards.

The timing couldn't have been better for our friendship. I needed an outlet for my growing rebelliousness, incited by my newfound belief that I was special and was owed a better education like my Governor's School friends. She needed to start getting serious about her future. I gave her a politicized outlet for her anger, and she gave me the courage to finally speak up. We became a formidable force in the school. We spent many days driving aimlessly around Ambridge, ranting about the president, singing loudly along to Green Day's *American Idiot* album.

Jenn signed up for a half-year class called "Contemporary Issues," taught by John Hess, one of our social studies teachers. An unabashed liberal, he taught the course with an openness that was rare at Ambridge. His goal for the course, he said, was simply to get us talking and thinking about the issues. He would argue with students whom he disagreed with—a far cry from the typical, neutral stance of teachers in political discussions. He was fair, though, since his only criterion for grading was having an opinion on issues, and I know of several Republican students who received A grades in the course.

Unsurprisingly, Jenn loved the class. We would spend lunch periods talking about what was discussed in class that day, cursing what we felt was the ignorance of our classmates, reading through issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* together, finding topics she could bring up in class.

The next semester, when Jenn's class ended, I changed my schedule to replace a study hall with this course. As I started the class, I was confronted directly with contradictions from my classmates in what I believed to be right. When students defended the president's actions or casually dismissed "alternative lifestyles" like homosexuality, I was angered. Because of the circular nature of life in the Ambridge Area, I lacked the ability to perceive the issue as indicative of the situation I was in. Rather, I found my classmates to be ignorant, selfish, and, at times, cruel. Without framing the issue within the larger context of how, through political action, economic

necessity, and various other factors, my town had become the way it was, I instead chose to believe it was a backwards, sexist, racist enclave.

I was, however, a model student in Contemporary Issues. I spoke up every day in class. The confidence I gained through confronting my differences with other students seeped into other classes I had that year. In my Problems of Democracy course, when posed the question of whether or not prisoners in Guantanamo Bay should receive the same constitutional protections as Americans, I argued that without granting them these rights, our country was proving it did not actually believe in these principles. I felt there was nothing reasonable about granting “universal” rights to Americans only. This statement was met with literal “boos” from my classmates and near daily jeering from then on. Later, when the same teacher suggested that no woman had won the Nobel Prize for Economics because of “perhaps some innate difference between men and women,” Mr. Hess urged me to report him to the principal. Some teachers’ encouragement can act as the authoritative validation necessary to cement one’s own beliefs.

At the same time, Jenn and I were enrolled in the same Honors English class, which was named such because the Gifted and Talented Education program had recently been eliminated at the high school level. Another friend of mine, Mark, was in the same class as me, as well as various other acquaintances. It was taught by the same teacher I had had for GATE English in tenth grade, as the twelfth grade English teacher retired the year before. Mark and I had been in the same class that year and knew we were in for trouble².

Mrs. Lawrence hated me already. I knew this, and I was preparing for it. I hated her, as well. While I can admit to having been, frequently, rebellious, loud-mouthed, and insubordinate for the sake of it, as a way of expressing my frustration, I stand by most of my behavior in this class. What I lacked was the ability to see outside the situation, the circumstances that lead to this teaching style, which may have made it more bearable. We started off the year reading Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* introduction in our

²In his yearbook entry to me at the end of my junior year, Mark wrote “Krista, prepare for another glorious year of nonstop plays, puppet shows, bad novels, and utter slackage. ..throughout ONE FULL YEAR WITH LAWRENCE to give an indication of the type of instruction we anticipated.

English anthology text, translated of course. At times, we acted out certain lines from the prologue, as Mrs. Lawrence had a theater background. SparkNotes tells me that there are about 30 characters mentioned throughout the tales, with the prologue serving as introduction to all of them. As I cannot read this text without latent feelings of panic and disdain emerging, I take their word for it, and this fits well with my memory of it.

At the end of this lesson, in which no lesson in literary analysis took place, no questioning of the significance of what amounted to a list of seemingly insignificant characters like “The Host” and “The Man of Law,” we took our test. The final test for this lesson was a matching test, in which we matched character names to “characteristics” that described them, such as “carries a knife.” There was no key and no one-to-one correspondence for characters and traits; rather, we answered about 100 questions of similar formatting, having to supply the names of the characters ourselves. Being under the impression that having read the text, paid attention in class, and re-read it at home along with the additional commentary in the textbook, I felt prepared. I received a D+ on this test

Around the same time, we studied excerpts from *Beowulf*. The class lessons similarly consisted of following the timeline laid out by the text, with class discussions limited to comprehension questions. Surprisingly, the unit test for this story consisted of an essay portion, which allowed us to choose among several analysis-level questions. I chose to answer the question of describing a person in the story who was affected by love or hate. I provided a detailed analysis of the character of Grendel, how love can motivate hate, how the two are opposite ends of the same coin, and how his social isolation and subsequent lack of love lead to hate and the epic battle between Beowulf and Grendel represented the constant battle of the two emotions in us all.

I honestly don’t know if that is an accurate reading of the story. Like the *Canterbury Tales*, I have not read the story since high school. I do know, however, that the only feedback I received on this test was “Grendel is not a *person*.³” I received no credit for that essay and thus a C- overall on the test.

³Later discussions with literary-minded individuals have revealed to me that there is debate among scholars as to whether or not Grendel is a literal or figurative “monster” in the story.

At this point, I had had enough. I marched to Mrs. Lawrence's desk, and argued, in front of the entire class, that such a technicality represented nothing about my work in the class, only to be met with, "You didn't follow the directions."

This sort of interaction followed by challenge and my assurance that the teacher was incompetent continued throughout the year. I could tell story after story—like the time Mrs. Lawrence said the apparition of an armed head in *Macbeth* meant a head with an arm coming out of it. The time she and I spent an entire class period debating whether or not a verb was transitive or intransitive—which resulted in every student in the class being forced to memorize all conjugations of a verb and recite them in front of the class (the student who got "to come" being the least fortunate). Likewise, we rebelled consistently, including the time Mark and I opened up shop and wrote papers for students who were failing their monthly essays—charging \$50 apiece. Humorously, the prompt was "The person I admire most in life."

The point, at least, is that there was something about this class that was so intensely infuriating for me, that aroused my sense of justice and fairness more than almost anything else that had happened to me in the first two decades of my life. Obviously, other things happened to me in high school—other teachers who were more or less successful at reaching me (for example, I went on to major in French and minor in Spanish, exactly like my high school French teacher did) —yet when sitting down to sum up my secondary schooling, all I could bring myself to reveal from my memory's vault was my righteous indignation at Mrs. Lawrence's teaching, and the "extra" education that was Governor's School.

I think I would have enjoyed my walk at home a lot more had I never gone to Governor's School. I think Mrs. Lawrence would never have asked Rick, on his first day of class with her, if he was a "troublemaker" like his sister had I never gone. Four years after I graduated high school, the Governor's School programs were closed as part of a budget deal in the state of Pennsylvania.

6.

From the beginning, my recollections of my secondary schooling, by my own admission in the previous chapter, were a contrast to the implicit, negative curriculum I encountered in elementary school. I talk of encouragement initially. I felt that things were easier but one need only probe deeper to see the ways in which a surface-level show of acceptance betray the contradiction of education's intents. Furthermore, my experiences in Governor's School and during my senior year of high school illustrate the ways in which Paulo Freire's discussions of emancipatory education, particularly with regard to "leadership" education do not, in fact, lead to the liberation of the oppressed through the education process. Finally, with this information and final analysis, I can begin to address the question of the purpose of my own education and how this applies to working-class children more generally.

My biggest issue at Governor's School was, hands down, my lack of prior knowledge. There was just an amount of cultural and intellectual currency handed to most of these students by their parents and teachers that I had never had access to. When reading Oakes's *Keeping Track* I was intrigued by her chapter which recounts the differences in student responses to questions such as, "What did you learn in class this year?" Most of the higher-track students responded with conceptual knowledge about the subject, or with abstract, higher-order thinking skills. The lower-track students usually wrote things like, "To do my homework" or "To be quiet" or commonly, "Nothing." While I can relate to being a higher-track student and having, to a certain extent, the critical thinking/higher knowledge curriculum, when I got to Governor's School, I realized that even my higher-level courses' contents paled in comparison to those of richer schools. I recall Keith Gilyard's musings on the so-called "Pygmalion effect," a concept arising from a study in which children purportedly rose to meet teacher expectations. He says: "Given the environment I was in, I think it is extremely naïve to believe that I did not have to conquer some form of malevolent prejudice and by doing so profited from a benevolent type" (68-69).

I read this line, recognizing the shift that took place in my own education. When I overcame the expectation of low performance set by teachers for poorer students, I think, I too was given the “benevolent prejudice” that allowed me to have a more pleasant secondary school experience—especially senior year, when most teachers (besides Mrs. Lawrence) let me get away with basically doing whatever I wanted. And yet—being in Governor’s School, it was as though even this benevolent, raised set of teacher expectations was still not very high, comparatively. There I found the major problem of our classed system of education. Being from a poorer school, the middle-class teachers there were still not of the elite, intellectual, worldly class like the teachers of my classmates at Governor’s School. With those instructors drawn away from students like me due to various factors of salary, budget, geography, and the paradoxical effect that intellectual freedom for teachers seems to be highest in schools where students need it the least (the richer ones) I was sentenced, by teachers who were mostly well meaning but ultimately limited themselves, to being the best of the lowest.

In this way, my Governor’s School experience can be interpreted as the first time a student like me was confronted, strongly, with the institutional effects of class difference. The variations of teacher treatment, student performance, and parental involvement between the working and middle-class students were certainly felt at Ambridge, as I have outlined previously. However, when I got to Governor’s School and saw just how rich and well educated these students were, the intellectual competition and tracking at Ambridge seemed like variations on one out-of-tune note. In graduate school, when reading Freire’s argument (hotly debated by my classmates) that, well, you’re either oppressed or you’re not, I thought back to those middle class kids that I’d resented and remembered my realization that they weren’t all that different from me once I saw the Governor’s School kids.

Among those middle-class students was my best friend, Stephanie, whom I mentioned earlier as having been one of the students who made fun of me for my late entry into the gifted program. So well-off compared to most of us, when she attended a local prestigious private school for high school, she found herself presumed by peers to be as ignorant as the most rednecked of Ambridge students. We later re-connected and

bonded deeply in college, I think partially due to the misunderstood feelings we were both working through.

Governor's School was enlightening culturally for the close relationship I developed with the other students, but Lauren in particular. As I recounted, I initially berated myself for my lack of knowledge—it took me years to come to the above analysis, wherein I could recognize the systematic limitations and not internalize them as personal failings. However, when students like Lauren let me into their lives, I did what any teenager would do and began to think I must be like them. That, combined with the mantra “You are not an admissions mistake,” made me think I had, in fact, just been limited by some personal vendetta the teachers of Ambridge High had against me, trying to hold me back and brainwash me to be dumb and compliant. If it sounds paranoid and conspiratorial, that's because it was. This was nothing like the analyses of class systems, gender stereotyping, and racial expectations I have today. This was simply pissed-off, resentful teenage anger that was misdirected.

Valerie Walkerdine provides a cogent analysis of what was actually happening for me, socially. According to her, many people of the oppressor class can come to feel a sort of fetishized camaraderie for the oppressed. She says, “The oppressor envies the oppressed but what he envies is an exotic fantasy, not the reality of living under oppression. That is just as neatly forgotten and suppressed” (209). When reading these words, I not only thought of Lauren and the ways she made me feel “accepted” (though looking back, I think of myself as playing some sort of comic, bumbling Appalachian fool side-kick role and cringe)—I also thought of how, weirdly, of all the super-smart, prettier, more worldly girls in the program, the young, child prodigy of the group (he'd skipped two grades and was two years younger than us) who I'll call Alex, fell deeply in love with me. It was baffling at the time. He barely knew me, and I could hardly engage in conversation with him. Others, similarly, were charmed by my stories of home and were envious of the tales I regaled them with of sneaking off into the woods to do Lord-knows-what.

Again, the purpose of the “intermediate units” for selecting students took on another purpose, albeit one more sinister in my interpretation. Obviously, I never would

have been there on “merit” alone. My SAT score was easily 200-300 points below most students, among other factors (my application essay, for instance, on the purpose of cultural education had a trite, Kumbaya, let’s-hold-hands-and-be-nice theme, rather than, say, any application to current world affairs). Rather, the purpose of my Governor’s School in particular—International Studies, which I refer to in the previous chapter, casually, as a haven for “socialists-in-training” where we were constantly shown “the effects of economic inequities abroad” and made to do community service—was more than obviously to develop a sense of duty and responsibility among these elite students toward those who were “less fortunate.” The inclusion of a student like myself here and there among the ranks of these rich kids, served a twofold purpose then.

First, students were exposed to poorer students from their own state, in a situation specifically designed to remove them from the tendency to judge us as backward, intellectually inferior, or socially inept (read: the “You are not an admissions mistake” mantra). In this way, the majority of the students easily fell into the exoticized view of me. Whether the program directors *intended* it as such, I sincerely doubt; rather, I think they probably frequently felt that “envious” feeling towards those of us who live more “real” lives, and think it’s a good thing and creates empathy.

I do not believe their analysis of it could have extended much further, or else it would have been discussed as openly as the economic inequality between the US and Africa was (obviously, this was not the case, as my pea-picking story illustrates perfectly). The effect of all of this, on the part of the program creators and directors, was therefore that they could maintain a slight illusion of fairness (picking “the best” students from even the poorer school districts, though as I’ve argued, my own selection as being among “the best” of my school was suspect) as well as providing their intended students with a chance to see “real” students like myself, and fantasize that they can now identify with us, avoiding charges of elitism.

Secondly, this social interaction created a change in me, as well as my classmates. One need only read my recounting of my senior year in high school to see the ways in which the so-called “leadership training” Freire warns against cause the oppressed to identify with the oppressor, rather than contributing to the liberation of the oppressed *by*

the oppressed themselves. When I was reading this text I had written, I began to realize what, truthfully, a little asshole student I was. Again, I'll stress that Mrs. Lawrence was easily one of the worst teachers I'd ever had. My challenging of her wasn't even what I found distasteful about my own behavior. I think students should be free to challenge their instructors.

Rather, it was the smug, selfish attitude I know I brought to the whole thing, in which I had somehow fancied myself *innately* better than everyone around me. I never would have done the things I did in Mrs. Lawrence's class had it not been for my identification with the entitlement of the students at Governor's School. I don't want to imply they were all badly behaved, rude students. They were quite friendly, affable characters and I liked most of them. But as Jonathan Kozol glibly notes, "Merit, no matter how it may have been attained, is somehow self-confirming" (140). Despite having been objectively the worst student in that program, my inclusion in it made me convinced of my own inherent excellence.

Freire's theories connect directly to my own experience here. His cautionary writing on the dangers of these sorts of leadership programs, in which "the best" of a certain group are chosen to be trained and then go back and "help" their communities (echoing, I believe, duBois's "talented tenth" we were sent forth to do "community service" projects to "give back" after Governor's School) is worth being quoted in full:

"These courses are based on the naïve assumption that one can promote the community by training its leaders—as if it were the parts that promote the whole and not the whole which, in being promoted, promotes the parts. Those members of the communities who show sufficient leadership capacities to be chosen for these courses necessarily reflect and express the aspirations of the individuals of their community. They are in harmony with the way of living and thinking about reality which characterizes their comrades, even though they reveal special abilities which give them the status of 'leaders'. As soon as they complete the course and return to the community with resources they did not formerly possess, they either use the resources to control the submerged and dominated consciousness of their comrades or they become strangers in their own communities and their former leadership position is thus threatened. In order to not lose their leadership status, they will probably tend to continue manipulating the community, but in a more efficient manner" (142).

My myopic moment of clarity when I read this quote! I saw how easily everything came together—the plucking away from my classmates for the gifted program, the selfish attitude senior year, the sense of not belonging I feel every time I go home. By coming to

identify with the oppressors, I was trained by them to provide a more efficient way of manipulating my community. I came back with ways that made me better at controlling the situation I was in—that of a mediocre education—but not in a way that contributed in any way to the liberation of myself or my fellow students. Instead, I was simply using my status to reiterate the specialness of the oppressor.

Furthermore, Freire tells us, “As the oppressor minority subordinates and dominates the majority, it must divide it and keep it divided in order to remain in power” (141). This sort of behavior clearly demonstrates itself in the racial division I talked about experiencing in Chapter 2. Yet, the ways that my selection for Governor’s School and the gifted programs more broadly served a higher purpose of continuing the maintenance of oppression within schooling became evident here as well. Students like me who, through a variety of circumstances (in my case, I would argue a dedicated mother, access to early education, and a nurturing fifth-grade teacher) come close to being able to liberate themselves, that is, to question and critique, to *name* their oppression and then *act* on changing it (becoming more fully human, as Freire calls it) must be redirected.

This redirection happens when we are pulled from our peers—whom we could help liberate themselves—and deemed different from them. We cease to identify with them and begin to identify with those who put us in the situation we now find ourselves in—that of being “special” or “gifted.” Perhaps the maintenance of gifted programs, in the face of such strong evidence of its uselessness for “gifted” students and its detrimental effects on “regular” or “slower” kids isn’t done for reasons nearly this insidious, as Oakes generously offers, when she says it is “business as usual,” but I use my own experience here as evidence of this clearly being its effect. By senior year, the process was complete—I was fully identifying with the goals of the oppressor class, considering myself the misunderstood genius that parents of gifted students everywhere like to tell stories of, and beginning to behave as though those around me were not worthy of my attention. In short, I was divided from my peers and ready to advocate for the maintenance of power that I mistakenly thought I held.

Conclusions

I consider the writing of this text to have been a limit-act on the part of a member of the oppressed. I am proud of having told this story; however average or non-dramatic it is—despite a few anecdotes in which I was treated less-than-fairly, it's not like my schooling was overtly, personally detrimental to my self-image, as I've read of being the case for, particularly, many impoverished students of color. Yet, I think it is precisely this “business as usual” element that makes it an important story to tell. We often focus on the lowest-performing school, hoping to bring them up to this “average” level—yet what are the messages that our standard-practice schools send?

I do have some practical advice for educators that has come to me throughout the process of writing this manuscript. I have felt, for a long time, the state of “forced educational schizophrenia,” as Keith Gilyard terms it, in which working-class and students of color who are successful in education find that they are not accepted by the elite or the middle class, and are also rejected by their peers (163). We try to fit in everywhere and find ourselves comfortable nowhere. Being aware of the long process that causes this in students is, I think, important for middle-class teachers who have never experienced it themselves. Likewise, anecdotes in which I felt alienated as a working-class student can help teachers see the ways in which their initial reaction to a situation may encourage classism (or sexism, racism, etc). First-person narratives are necessary for providing the perspectives that are not our own.

However, one question that I desperately wanted to answer nagged me the entire (long) time I was off-and-on writing this: What was the point of it all? If I was going to critique the career-track, or “gifted” path that I was placed on as being detrimental to my peers (and my own sense of belonging), what was the point of education for me or for them? Additionally, my continuing to work in working-class jobs outside of college had me wondering about the point of intellectual pursuits for me, but *particularly* for those who hadn't gone to college. If we still need someone to work at Goodwill (like I just did) or flip burgers or run a gas station counter—well, what are we doing as teachers? Is it

really just, as a substitute teacher in a school I was volunteering in once told me, true that “we can only hope to make excellent students better”?

I had the words of Freire repeating in my brain like a skipping CD—the “task of the oppressed [is] to liberate themselves and their oppressors” and he obviously considers education integral to this (44). I did too, clearly, or I wouldn’t have gone through all of this trouble to get myself into education. So...great, but what did this liberation *look* like? Economic utopia? The end of violence? What the hell was it? I wanted something concrete, something moving from the naval-gazing musings of “Am I oppressed or oppressing or both or neither?” I felt that many people found themselves asking after reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

The answer came to me while reading two texts that weren’t found on any of my critical pedagogy reading lists—on the reading list for any education class of mine, actually. In some ways, I think this task of liberation has been associated with the process of education for centuries, going back to the beginning of philosophy as a discipline. Socrates—despite all the obvious criticisms to be made about the definitions of republicanism in Plato’s writings about him—was put to death for basically advocating that people liberate themselves. Again, things became clearer to me as I read the words of Socrates, summing up the charges against him in “Apology”: “Socrates is an evil-doer, and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in heaven, and he makes the worse appear the better cause, and he teaches the aforesaid doctrines to others” (Plato 35).

What is the purpose of education, if not to make “the worse appear the better cause”? To turn our perceptions of the world inside out? Socrates later admits that his methods are, frankly, annoying to those in power, with the following metaphor: “I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you” (Plato 49). Yet, Socrates famously and paradoxically insists that he is a worthless teacher:

“Happy is Evenus, I said to myself, if he really has this wisdom, and teaches at such a moderate charge. Had I the same, I should have been very proud and conceited; but the truth is that I have no knowledge of the kind” (Plato 36).

I had the same feeling when I read a letter from Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, published in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* in 1844. In it, Marx argues:

“But if the designing of the future and the proclamation of ready-made solutions for all time is not our affair, then we realize all the more clearly what we have to accomplish in the present—I am speaking of a *ruthless criticism of everything existing*, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be” (13, emphasis in original text).

These texts helped me see the ways in which I felt education had been a success for me—even though, despite my “credentials” I wasn’t translating my education into economic success. In a practical sense, my life hadn’t really been changed by my education. But I clung to its importance. And I realized: Once I got to college and experienced the critical texts that led me to my current understanding of the world, I took the experiences I had had in becoming a “literate” individual, in becoming educated, and used them as a frame of reference for understanding the state of our society. I liberated myself, mentally, from the limitations of my birth, from the beliefs about people like me that others had imposed on me.

If, as Marx says, I cannot upend the world in my lifetime, I cannot formulate ready-made recommendations for the liberation of myself and others, I can, at least, live my life in such a way as to question *everything* to demand that the existence of systems or situations justify its reasons for being. This is the mentality that leads to unions, to protests, to petitions, to revolutions. Education does not need to take on the task of prescribing the future. Literacy education in particular does, however, have to become that gadfly, annoying the current state of things, keeping it uncomfortable and forcing it to reckon with its own existence. We realize that we don’t know things, and in this way, we can begin to know. We acknowledge, basically, that common sense is not real knowledge.

When I took on this perspective, practical advice for my own teaching and for others came easily. Simply, it seems teachers should be able to justify their own existence. Math teachers should be able to argue for why students who will not “use” calculus in day-to-day life (such a common refrain among bored, uninspired students) should still be learning it. English teachers should be able to explain the value of

Paradise Lost or Shakespeare. If they cannot stand up to the “Why? Why? Why?” of the gadfly—if they cannot ruthlessly criticize themselves—then they should not be teaching. Likewise, this integration of questioning things—“Why are you here?” should be the first thing students are asked and re-asked in every class they take, starting in kindergarten.

It is only when they liberate themselves from the automatic beliefs about their lives can they begin to help students liberate themselves. In this way, we move away from the “trickle-down” style of liberation, currently in practice in critical education—even our best critical educators tend to be at the graduate level, “training” future teachers/leaders in how to “train” their students to be educated/liberated. I think this is why I didn’t experience these critical perspectives until college—which, as I’ve said, is not viable in a classed society. We cannot all afford to go to college. This must be happening at all levels. We can all participate if we ruthlessly criticize, if we make the right look wrong and the wrong look right, and we can all liberate from there, which, as Freire shows us, is how it should be.

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