“You Feel Like You're the Lifeline”: Working-Class Educational Narratives from a Southern Indiana City

An Oral History and Ethnographic Division III Thesis by Kayla Hogan

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Dedication and Acknowledgments

This is for all those who kept me alive, who told me I deserve more, who loved me through the struggle of expanding my world. This is for Mazzy and Neisha whose friendships were destiny, and Charissa and Danni from a time before I knew to be grateful for their support. This is for the tears spoken at the River and for everyone who wanted to leave but didn't know how. This is for my mother who wrote a letter to Hampshire admissions about how I would be successful at whatever I chose to do even though she didn't want me to go to Massachusetts. This is to everyone who has provided me with unconditional love even when I was too stubborn to accept or appreciate it. This is for the students I met and who taught me to remember my roots and how much language matters, but sometimes silence speaks volumes more. This is to my hometown, the complicated mess of it, for the people on stolen bikes in 110 degree weather just trying to get by and for the Southern Baptists and Pentecostals and for the women who have forsaken nearly everything to love their children and for us—the ones who left because we had no choice. I love you all. Thank you for making me what I am.

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Introduction

(Re)Entering the Falls City

There is a picture of me with my two closest friends from home after our second year of college, at Waterfront Park in Louisville, Kentucky. I now recognize it as my favorite summer since beginning college—a summer we all felt powerful, unstoppable, perhaps even comfortable with ourselves for the first time. In the picture we are at a public water fixture; a display that people are not supposed to use as a public swimming pool but they do anyway since it is large and free. In this photo, my best friend from middle school, Shay, and I are in floral sundresses smiling at my friend Sonia as she takes the picture in the early June sunshine with our feet in the water. In the background are people in swimsuits and plain t-shirts and shorts, moving through the dirty fountain water. Outside of the picture are people with beach towels and lawn chairs, using the site for sunbathing as one would any public swimming pool. We are happy, easy, and comfortable while everybody else is there for a little relief from the sweltering Ohio Valley summer. We had become tourists in our own hometown. While being here was nothing new for us, looking at the pictures later we all started laughing: we were different.

Dressed up in our summertime best, all happily placed in internships we loved in the city, we were forced to grapple with the fact that by the end of our second year of college, we no longer belonged. Even if the people around us made sense to us, even though they could have been our mothers, brothers, nieces and nephews, we stood out to them. People around us looked at us like we did not belong there with them, our feet in the dirty water. We felt as if we were just experiencing home after a long time away. With photographic proof however, we too had to realize the truth. My comment on the photo posted on facebook reads: “This is
what upward mobility looks like.” We were all first-generation college students halfway finished with our undergraduate education, and this time it really hit us hard: we may have been physically home, but we would never quite be at home again.

I began this project because I've spent four years away from home at a college in Massachusetts trying to piece together what it is that got me to college and what it is that meant that most others with whom I grew up did not—and if they did go to college, what made them stay in the area. Building on my own experiences and knowledge as a first-generation college student far from home, I sought to explore the educational and family histories of two other friends who also moved away from home to attend small private liberal arts institutions in order to understand what it means to others to be a first-generation college student and how we might better equip working-class students with the ability to attend college if they want to.

To delve even deeper into the questions I have about what it means to grow up working-class or poor and what forms our cultures and educations, I also spent time in an elementary school in my hometown that has experienced a neighborhood shift in the last ten years. I spent this time observing student-teacher relationships, asking students questions about their lives, and in many ways playing a role as a mediator between the role of teacher they've marked for adults and the role of student that they’ve marked for themselves.

In many ways, this is an oral history and ethnographic account less about simply what it means to be a first-generation college student and more about what it means to be a first-generation college student who leaves—why do we leave home, what happens when we return, and what is it about the culture of my region that makes it so taboo and difficult to leave? When I talked to students at Northfield Elementary School, many of them had dreams that would likely require some disconnect from their communities; there were certainly times I wondered if their dreams would change due to the cultural norm in the region of not leaving.
Furthermore, I often found myself questioning their conceptions of the world when I would find out how distant a world even Louisville, Kentucky, across the river with its small skyscrapers and semi-busy downtown seemed to these children. What does home mean to residents of Jeffersonville when a city five minutes away and across the river seems like an incalculable distance?

To do this project in my hometown meant an emotional investment I would not have otherwise had; if I had not, however, I would not have had the insight into the community, the history, and the range of experiences of Jeffersonville and the surrounding areas. At times, this felt overwhelming and impossible—how could I possibly shine a light into both my community and the first-generation college student experience? After my interviews and observations, however, the message felt more urgent than ever to me: working-class students without family who have attended college are working harder than students with family who have attended college and who have economic privilege, with less opportunity to be successful afterward, and with a much lower quality-of-life on their college campuses than their wealthier peers.

**Methodologies**

When I began this project, I wanted to focus a full lens of education in my hometown in Jeffersonville, Indiana. This was, of course, a bit overambitious for the six months I had to spend there. I originally sought out to gain an oral history account from current first-generation college students I knew as well as accounts from their families of what education meant in their lives. When the school year began, I sought out an elementary school in which I planned to get to know students and build relationships with their families by finding out what parents wanted for their children's futures. The hope was to connect family values and histories with young students' ambitions for their futures. Knowing my own experiences and
having gained insight into my friends' processes of getting to college, I had sought out to prove that without some external exposure, students would remain ambitious for working-class jobs and futures, having not realized that there is a world outside of that of their families and communities.

Everything turned out a bit more complicated than I expected. Looking back on it, I should have known it would be, knowing my own family and how I ended up attending college at a private liberal arts institution in Massachusetts. There were students who wanted to be doctors when their parents worked full-time in factories; one of the few students who had parents with college degrees wanted to be a pro-basketball player. I came to find out quite quickly that students are more than their family histories.

I spent the summer trying to re-connect with my hometown after three years away, knowing that I would be there until January. I interviewed my family and friends, asking my family about what they viewed our family values to be as well as why I have been the first to go to college or even graduate from high school in our family. I did this in an effort to gain some insight on their opinions on education and how I fit into the family after leaving. I used these interviews as jumping off points for interviews with my friends. I interviewed three friends once. Each interview lasted between an hour and two-and-a-half hours. Having heard many of their thoughts on their educational experiences, the interviews often felt as if we were mostly attempting to document these experiences and struggles. My friends were well-informed about my project and excited to participate. Most believe, as I believe, that the experiences of first-generation college students are not talked about enough—and that when they are talked about, they are spoken of so abstractly that frequently “first-generation college student” can begin to appear as a monolithic group. This literature is useful, of course, to illuminate larger struggles of many first-generation college students, however it does little to
tell individual stories and struggles. Much of David L. Morgan's work focuses on overarching experiences of first-generation college students, such as his work on their struggle to fulfill the role of college student without the cultural capital to do so.¹ Yet we never hear how these experiences are complicated on an individual basis, and that is what I hope to do here.

Those who I have interviewed all live in the same town and we attended school together. However, we had different families with different ideas about the world and different hopes for us in school and outside of school. Our pathways to college are different and what we wanted out of our college experiences are varied. For the two people included in this project and myself, what we have in common is the experience of applying to and attending selective, private, liberal-arts institutions.

The interviews were conducted in my bedroom or theirs, and once in my own living room. We would sit cross-legged on beds or floors, picking lint from shag carpeting, my friends occasionally throwing their arms up in exasperation as they explained a particularly frustrating event. Afterward, when the recorder was stopped, everything would be more relaxed. We would drive to the river or lay on beds and reflect on our school experiences. How proud we were to have gotten where we were, how scared we were now. Approaching our senior year of college, we were all trying to process where we found ourselves after our college experiences and how to move on from them after being so changed by them.

What has resulted in written form are intimate portraits of individuals and myself, centered around a common theme in first-generation college student experience—the experience of coming and going between locations, translating between multiple worlds, trying to find one's place in academia. I could have combined all my interviews and research around multiple topics, synthesizing what I found to draw larger conclusions about what it means to

be the first in the family to attend college, but oftentimes that felt like a betrayal to the stories I had been told and with which I had been trusted. Being the first in one's family to attend college in the United States is not a process of simply learning to navigate academia and gaining cultural capital. We are deeply wound up in our family's pasts and futures, confused, frequently hurt by the casual racism and discrimination—microaggressions—experienced on our college campuses regarding race or class location. Looking closely at one life to think through a larger idea is useful here; sometimes one story does a better job at forming a larger narrative than shorter glimpses into multiple stories.

As for my field work at Northfield Elementary School—located about five minutes from my own home in Jeffersonville, I spent approximately 15 hours a week in the school in a kindergarten classroom, third-grade, fourth-grade, fifth-grade, fourth-and-fifth-grade reading intervention groups and a special education classroom. In each class I spent approximately two-to-three hours a week. Most of my written work is based on field notes taken while observing, but I was able to interview seven students and hold structured conversations on the topic of intelligence and family with a good deal more, most of whom were in fourth grade, and three teachers. I attempted to contact parents and was able to successfully complete one interview with a parent of a student at Northfield before my time in the school was winding down. Because I spent the most time with fourth-and-fifth graders within their classrooms and their intervention classes, much of my focus is on these grades. However, some of the most useful conversations I had in forming my ideas about the school and the students within them comes from the conversations I had with the third-grade teacher, Ashley Griffin, during third-grade recess time. She was an incredibly involved teacher in the school, and many of the fourth graders in whom I was most interested were in her class the previous year. Observing kindergarten and having conversations with these young Northfield students throughout the
year was also helpful in thinking through how students develop roles in the classroom at an early age.

For my interviews with students, we frequently sat on the floor in the hallway in view of the teacher and other classrooms due to the open-school layout of Northfield, but to provide the feel of a more private interview. I asked students about their favorite and least favorite parts of school, what they wanted to be when they grew up, whether they knew of family members who had attended college, and what their families did for fun. In more casual conversations, I would often ask students what they thought about the meaning of “smart” and what their favorite things to do were. After I interviewed students, I would allow them to ask me any questions they had for me. Frequently these questions involved asking me about how I did college—what were dorms like, if I lived at home, where Massachusetts even was. Occasionally, they would turn the tables on me, asking me similar questions I would ask them, and making me realize how hard-hitting my questions might actually be. One student asked me what scared me most about being a teacher, if I did choose to become one. Another thought to ask if there were people in my family with whom I could share difficult parts of my life. Looking back on it, frequently the interviews were key moments in building relationships with students at Northfield. After interviewing the students, they were typically much more likely to tell me about what was going on in their life, in school and outside of school. My interviews with teachers usually focused on their own educational background, their teaching philosophies, their perception of the school, and how or if their teaching has changed as the student population at Northfield has diversified.

What results from my fieldwork and my questions regarding the experiences of my friends and I is an ethnographic piece which hypothesizes about the development of “roles” in the school, and how these roles—of good kid, or disrespectful kid, smart or “less sharp”—
seem to create an elementary-level form of tracking. Tracking is already in effect by fifth-grade when, by the beginning of the second quarter, they had begun dividing math instruction by ability level. How these students' educational lives ultimately play out in tracked middle schools (grades 6-8 in this school district) and high schools I will never know. However, it is the fifth grade teacher who recommends the level of courses students take in middle school. Undoubtedly, especially after my field work at Northfield, teachers' perceptions of students' cooperation and ability are not purely objective. They are based in racialized, classed, and gendered notions about appropriate behavior and school-sanctioned intelligence. I was often left wondering about what knowledges many of the students who struggled in school were forced to leave at the school doors when they entered Northfield. To what extent do family and cultural knowledge matter, even if they are celebrated, in the American public school? Does a dismissal of cultural knowledges in favor of colorblind ideologies set up certain students to fare poorly in this school and others across the United States?

I spent time coding transcribed interviews by open coding concepts I found throughout individual interviews, and then later singling out themes found within each interview and between interviews. What resulted in my interviews with first-generation college students were themes centering around translation, class-anxiety, fearing not being able to hide one's background, and not feeling prepared for college work. Themes from teachers included Northfield as an “inner city school,” teaching because of their own impoverished background, and grappling with the changing demographics of the school. The students' interviews, because they call for individual experiences within the classroom often did not follow patterns, yet many students brought up fear and anxiety around bullying, the importance of respect from

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teachers, and curiosity about what college students do with their time.

I begin this project with the narrative experiences as first-generation college students of myself and my two close friends, Sonia and Shay. Each of us attend private, liberal arts colleges—Sonia in Central Indiana and Shay and myself in Western Massachusetts. Each chapter focuses on a particular theme of what it means to be a first-generation college student while focusing specifically on one person. In this way, I seek to at once provide a human story of often abstracted concepts of what it means to be a “first-generation college student” while also continuing to draw a critical eye to the systems that make it difficult for students to become the first in their families to attend college—and to remain there once they gain entry.

Chapter one begins with my own story as a student at Hampshire College and seeks to illuminate through a series of vignettes what it means to move between college and home. Chapter two focuses on Shay—her experiences as a first-generation Muslim Indian-American from a family with upwardly mobile ambitions who seeks to find a “place” at Mount Holyoke College, a prestigious all-women's college. Chapter three seeks to illuminate the experience of Sonia as she moves through Depauw University in Greencastle, Indiana as a mixed-race Pentecostal student who has spent much of her life translating between worlds, but cannot translate the world between college and home. Finally, I include an ethnographic chapter on Northfield Elementary and how the school invisibly tracks students along class and race lines through the conception of “good” and “difficult” kids. Having spoken to my friends about their elementary school experiences as people of color in Jeffersonville, I noticed glaring similarities in the school as well as changes in the community which made interpreting the context of students in the school all the more difficult for me, since I had expected to deeply understand the underlying troubles in the Jeffersonville school system.
 Histories and Economies

The towns along the Ohio River in Southern Indiana are some of the oldest towns founded after the Louisiana Purchase and the settlement of the Northwest Territory. Clark County, Indiana, the county in which my hometown is located is officially named after George Rogers Clark who played a role in the founding of many of the towns in the county and who spent a large portion of his life in the area.

Clark County lies on the North bank of the Ohio River. A significant gateway to the state of Indiana, Clark County’s settlement began in 1783. The state of Virginia rewarded General George Rogers Clark and his regiment for their victorious capture of Forts Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes from the British by granting them 150,000 acres of land. A small portion of this land, 1000 acres, became known as Clarksville. Clarksville, the first authorized American settlement in Northwest Territory, was founded the following year in 1784.3

My hometown, located within a range of Clarksville (founded by 1786),4 has boundaries that are so fluid I have never seen a sign separating them, became known as Jeffersonville around the time Thomas Jefferson took office, due to the use of the grid system in city planning designed by him.5 The towns in Southern Indiana were founded before Louisville, Kentucky; while their economies are associated with river commerce, in many ways they've developed in a culturally independent way. Both Louisville and Jeffersonville, due to their key location along the Ohio River have historically been busy due to much of the industry located along the river—transportation of goods between the regions of the United States6, ship building7, and even the slave trade8 have had a prominent place in the river economies of the states bordering

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3 Clark County Government, “Clark County History.” http://www.co.clark.in.us/history.html
4 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 36-37.
the Ohio⁹. Slavery existed in Southern Indiana as well as Louisville and schools in the region remained segregated until Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954.¹⁰ This region's complex history, associated economically with Louisville yet historically separate from the South makes for a location that has developed in a way that makes it difficult to classify as strongly anything, yet still creates a strong regional identity amongst many residents.

Today, my city is struggling economically, as many of the surrounding cities have in the past. These cities, however, have began rebounding through gentrification by the middle-class from Louisville seeking cheaper real estate or those fleeing Jeffersonville since the recession. Theft and violence are increasing and businesses are moving to the outskirts of town, the site of newly built neighborhoods growing around them.

Jeffersonville, Indiana, is a small city with 44,953 residents, but the region is largely fluid between the surrounding cities and towns. The city is 80.4% white, 13.2% black, 3% multiracial, 1.9% identified as some other race, 1.1% Asian—with the largest Asian communities hailing from the Indian subcontinent, China, and the Philippines, and 0.3 identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native. Of the entire population, 4.1% identify as Hispanic or Latino. The largest industries in the area are education and health care (22%); manufacturing (13.6%); and arts, recreation and food services (11.2%). There is a significant portion of single family households headed by women (13.4%). In terms of educational attainment, which is relevant to my entire project, it is important to note that for adults 25 and over, the percentages are as follows:¹¹

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⁹ See Figures 1 and 2 for images of Ohio River in relation to Jeffersonville and Louisville.
¹¹ All statistics from United States Census Bureau, "Population and Economic Characteristics."
Less than 9th grade: 3.6%
9th-12th grade, no diploma: 9.3%
High school graduate (includes equivalency): 34.1%
Some college, no degree: 23.1%
Associates Degree: 9%
Bachelor's Degree: 14%
Graduate or Professional degree: 6.9%

Jeffersonville is thus not an “uneducated” city, but it is also a city where 70% of the population does not have a college degree, creating a large gap in the cultural capital obtained between those who have attended college and those who have not.

As a region located without a clear Northern or Southern identity, where I've grown up is hard even for me to define. Jeffersonville, Indiana has much of its cultural roots in the South, but there is little historical information that has been collected. There is more information—although it is still limited compared to a larger city—available on Louisville, which is located a 5-10 minute drive from Jeffersonville, across the Ohio River. We share much—workers, history, families. Growing up though, I learned that many families in the area, my own included, feel a distance from Louisville. My own family instilled in me a fear of Louisville as dangerous and “too fast,” although my own city is about as dangerous as some of Louisville's most crime-riddled neighborhoods. Jeffersonville separate from Louisville and we define our own position in the region as safer and essentially different than those in the city, even though we are not without urban crime.

However, because we share labor history and to some degree economies, a look at Louisville's economic systems and history will also help look at my own hometown. Louisville and the surrounding areas in Southern Indiana differed from much of the Rust Belt economic struggles since the economies in the region were not dependent on one large industry. However, it is true that in each economic downturn, the area's working-class has suffered. Louisville's economic triumphs up to World War II are summed up in this account:
The Louisville economy was tied to commerce and manufacturing almost from the beginning. In the 1800s the city was a hub for transportation systems between both east and west and north and south first because of its location on the Ohio River and was later a railroad center...After World War I the city joined the nationwide boom of the roaring 1920s, as Louisvillians opened over 150 new manufacturing facilities employing over 36,000 people by the end of the decade...It was the massive industrial effort accompanying World War II that made the most significant impact on Louisville, however. Even before the United States formally entered the war, defense industries and facilities, such as the powder plant and naval ordnance center in nearby southern Indiana and more importantly the rubber and chemical industry in the western neighborhoods of Louisville, created an 18 percent rise in industrial employment by spring 1940.12

One source mentions the importance of the facilities in Southern Indiana as essential not only to the economy in Indiana, but also to the economy of the entire region, bringing in workers from across Indiana and Louisville to fill the positions available. It is also worth noting that the manufacturing jobs that opened in Southern Indiana and Louisville were amongst the first that employed African Americans in well-paying industrial jobs with respectable titles. By 1943 African Americans were being employed in a number of positions they had not previously been offered:

For the first time blacks in Louisville area worked as shipbuilders. The navy-owned Howard Ship Yards in nearby Jeffersonville, Indiana, hired blacks as buffers, painters, and welders in the production of landing craft to carry tanks and infantry...African American employment soared, and for the first time blacks in Louisville were hired for a wide range of manufacturing positions that had previously been closed to them.13

Up until the 1970s, manufacturing in Louisville continued to prevail and as with many other cities, post-industrialism began to take hold of manufacturing jobs. Progressively, Louisville and the surrounding areas have seen a sharp decline in the manufacturing jobs that have offered sustainable pay to the working-class residents. K'Meyer and Hart cite 1998 as the beginning of a new tide of economic downturn and unemployment—deindustrialization

spurred by NAFTA. “In the next five years after 1998 the community saw a 9.5 percent decrease in manufacturing employment, and by mid-decade a total of 16,900 jobs were lost.”

This set the stage for the city in which I grew up, a city that has been described as increasingly less wealthy, although it was never really that wealthy to begin with.

When my parents officially divorced in 2000, my mother, brother, and I moved from a rural town to Jeffersonville with my grandma to make ends meet. I knew Jeffersonville was perceived as more dangerous than my small town of about 1,500, but other than the lack of acreage between houses, I didn't really notice a difference in terms of how afraid I felt at any given moment. I hold a theory that the perceived heightened danger in the city comes from the visible disintegration of industry in Jeffersonville compared to my small town where everyone who didn't work on farms commuted to work in the city. Buildings were falling apart, left emptied, and people, often now poor, lived closer together. Poverty became visible for my family and I in a jarringly different way than it had when I lived in the rural midwest.

Every one of the friends with whom I felt close in high school had families which struggled with money, my own included. We never viewed this as the reason for our friendships, although looking back, our socioeconomic discomfort was likely a uniting force in our friendships. This is not to say we stood out as poor young people in our hometown; most people in our city are working-class or poor. Perhaps what set us apart was our precarious position within our city's poverty. Each of us had with parents with “dirty jobs”—jobs which involved physical labor or perhaps positions within organizations that my friends were afraid to divulge lest the reveal illegal activities or under-the-table payment—we were never unusual in our town's population. What set us apart was our positions as “high-achieving, high-potential” students on the honors track in our public high school. Perhaps my friends would

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tell the story differently, but I believe deprived of any other characteristic identity in the
limited spaces controlled and dominated by the white middle-class of Jeffersonville, we came
together as the poor, smart kids.

Today the economy remains centered on many of the same industries, such as
shipbuilding along the Ohio River, but technological jobs are also being actively expanded into
spaces such as the Powder Plant that had been all but abandoned after their closures\textsuperscript{15}. Many
of these jobs spurred by economic development committees in the area are in call centers
which serve to provide those with high school educations the opportunity to earn more money
than they would in food services or retail and also exempt them from the physical labor of
manufacturing jobs, which can in many ways feel like a step up from the jobs their parents
have. My own brother works at one of these centers and to my mother it seems as if he has
achieved a dream she cannot imagine. And while in these jobs there is limited room for
growth without a college degree, I understand that these are jobs which re-tell the story of
what it means to be working-class in the current economy.

\textit{Educational Histories}

I never conceptualized of where I grew up as the South until I came to New England. After all, I am geographically from a northern state, Indiana. And all of my friends always viewed Kentucky to the south as inherently less cultured and mostly an embarrassment, with the exception of Louisville. But it was when I came to school in Massachusetts where my experiences witnessing and taking part in racism made my hometown all the more complex. I always viewed growing up in the North as removing us from Southern racist guilt—we were never a city with slavery or segregation, right? The first time someone complicated this North-South dichotomy was my senior year government teacher when he taught us how a

neighboring town, Clarksville, was originally part of the Jeffersonville school system until schools were required to desegregate and the wealthier neighborhood that constitutes what is now Clarksville decided to form their own town with their own separate school district. It was in this moment that I realized the stories told about the boundaries of the North and the South are not so distinct, that where we lived had a complicated history as well as a complicated educational history that invited a critical eye.

Louisville and the surrounding areas have a complex history surrounding education, a history that is characterized historically as “not as bad as it could be,” which essentially serves to define Louisville and Southern Indiana in contrast to residents’ conception of the struggles in the Deep South regarding education and segregation. When I originally began looking into the history of education in Louisville and Southern Indiana, I believed all the north to be separate from Jim Crow laws and histories, which ignores the complexity of geography, history, and how borders are defined. Why would a northern city that borders the South have functionally different laws or systems? Conversely, why would a southern city that borders the North function so radically different? The answer is that they don't; they converge and interact. These cities are not outside history, but are a microcosm of what it means to “border” along the Mason-Dixon line—or, in this case, the extended boundary of the Mason-Dixon line of the Ohio River.

To provide a lens into the complexities of the desegregation in schools' conversation in Louisville, Tracy K'Meyer places the work done in both a religious frame and a frame that emphasizes Louisville's reputation as progressive:

By mid century both black and white civil rights advocates recognized these religious communities as the source of an influential group of local residents who provided support, at minimum, for amelioration of conditions for African Americans and, at

times, for progress toward equal rights. The city's activists, including a small group of black leaders who were “much more aggressive than people” in nearby northern cities such as Indianapolis, and a smaller number of white and black radicals, worked within a climate established and to some extent controlled by a relatively liberal white intellectual and business elite.  

Lyman Johnson, a prominent African American activist in the city who was heavily involved in both the desegregation of the University of Louisville and the Louisville public school system manipulated white liberals' pride that Louisville was not as bad as it could be to chide the Board of Education in Louisville to integrate schools by comparing it to his hometown in Tennessee:

I found the Board of Education, I chided the board any number of times, right in open session. I said, “Oh my God, Mr. Superintendent and fellow board members, you're dragging your feet on this business of integration. The hometown that I come from, and the little town down there, it's famous all over the world for having started the Ku Klux Klan—Pulaski, Tennessee. Why they're so far ahead of you in integration that you ought to go down there and find out how to do it.” Yeah, yeah, I told them. 

By challenging the assumptions that Louisville was more progressive than the rest of the South, Johnson assisted in bringing about actual change in the community and the school system. There is evidence that this was and has historically been the way of bringing about change in Louisville, as well as what hinders it. A confidence in the city's progressiveness is both what has given city leaders reason to challenge progress, yet in disproving it at times has also forced the city to reconsider its position in the South. 

I see this attitude even more prominently five minutes north in Southern Indiana where it is widely accepted that we played no role in the oppressions which took place in the Jim Crow South. Just as my government teacher revealed the truth about school desegregation in Southern Indiana schools, Southern Indiana encompasses a history which allows it to claim

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northerness while in many ways participating in southern institutions both neutral (foodways, language, etc) and oppressive (slavery, racialized and classed opportunities, and segregation). The education system is no different. In fact, it has potential to be even more dangerous; the feeling of being exempt from the horrors of slavery that had taken place only minutes south means that contemporary white residents often feel no responsibility for the existence of these institutions and that they do not feel as if they need to be changed or even thought about.

From the founding of Indiana to 1949, no laws existed regarding the segregation or non-segregation of their schools. Dwight W. Culver summarizes the history when he says:

In succeeding years there were trends both toward and away from segregation, with the trend toward separate schools for whites and Negroes being sharply accelerated in the 1920's under the influence of the Ku Klux Klan. Most of the larger cities had partial or complete segregation in education by the time the Klan control of Indiana schools was broken in the 1930's, as did even some of the smaller cities, especially in the Southern part of the state.19

In the coming years, schools in Indiana—especially in Southern Indiana—would continue to find ways around the law which required desegregation in 1949. Culver notes that many schools in Southern Indiana would essentially allow African American students the option to attend formerly segregated white schools, but continued to keep the same schools in use, essentially allowing segregation to remain in place.20 Just as my government teacher had told us, after years of segregation and confused history, it makes sense that desegregation did not become fully implemented until federal law demanded it with Brown vs. Board of Education, and even then it meant that towns would faction in protest of it.

There are two prominent terms and ideas which come up frequently in my work. While much is personal and I try to leave heavy theory out of much of the discussion, defining these two ideas beforehand will be useful for framing the project. Microaggressions, defined as

20 Ibid., 298.
“brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color;”21 are generally perceived as innocuous by the person saying them. Another important term in this project is cultural capital, originally elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu when he wrote on differing forms of “capital,” which allow members of society to advance themselves and navigate their worlds with ease:

Economic capital which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations (connections), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility.22

While all forms of capital play a role in unfair advantages that others receive in navigating society, cultural capital is of particular relevance in this project as the institutional advantages provided to white, middle-class or upper class students who are comfortable in their positions in the educational realm greatly contrasts with the experiences of those who do not hold privileged positions in society. “Cultural capital includes access to personal libraries, large vocabularies, cultural outings (i.e. museums, vacations), and technology. It also includes the inside knowledge of schooling processes and the occupational flexibility to attend a variety of school events.”23 My friends, many of the students I observed, and myself have all struggled navigating worlds where others have more capital and have worked to gain cultural capital in Jeffersonville schools and as my friends and I moved into private colleges across the United States.

This rudimentary information on the educational and economic history in Louisville and Southern Indiana is necessary to understand the dynamics that contribute to my schooling experiences as well as those of my friends and the elementary students with which I spent four months. These histories and the current economic and racial climate contribute not only to the ideologies which are being taught and enacted within schools but also contribute to the policies that shaped the education of my friends and I as well as which are currently shaping the educations of the students I had the opportunity to get to know.
Figure 1

Map of Ohio River and Ohio River Watershed, Karl Musser

Figure 2

Street-Level Map of Jeffersonville and Downtown Louisville, Google Maps (2013)
Chapter 1

Kayla: Coming and Going

February 1, 2010
They came home with rings, babies, ties. I came home freed. I came home, but like a
bird I left, flew east over the course of a day. Flew east into the cold, to a place against
logic, to the only place I’ve ever felt whole. We moved. We froze still at bus stops, our
asses numb against steel, my mouth running like hot water. Home. Home is fucked and
fucked up, the way it should be. Home knows too much about others. Home drinks too
much and sometimes says what should be left unsaid. Home. Amherst, Massachusetts.
The safe place we can go as we are and not be questioned. A single filled with incense
on the queer hall. Copious amounts of time at home. When I landed, wings out, I only
began to breathe when I could see the topography of the map in the sky change. Water
and open space and bumps of brown that from the ground bounce light like a Renoir
painting. Sometimes you just know. Something about your soul connects before you
ever do. Something about the past dies before your memories do. Those of us that did
this do ourselves, our lives are irreversible. Untangled from the roots in the fertile soil,
sprouted and moving, we move parts of our worlds with us, but our wings grow. With
every flight our wings grow. It’s irreversible once it begins and all those trees still
rooted in deep soil stay stagnant while we stop on top only to visit, only to enjoy the
view. We are irreversible, constantly in motion, Home.

An Education

This is not a story I am qualified to tell. I am a poor girl from an abusive midwestern
home, but I never even knew that until I got out. “Too smart for your own good,” that’s what
they always told me. They meant I asked too many questions. My families and my teachers
have always known that I watch for the moments people become uncomfortable and then I ask
questions. I have been ready to see the cracks in the truth my family presented to me, in the
truth my teachers presented to me since I began to ask “Why?”

I do not know anymore where my education ends and I begin. Too much has changed.
I have always been able to separate myself from my education, been able to never take home
what I learn about in a classroom. I have preferred it that way, silently learning and leaving it
in a building. There has never been a space in my home for education. I have kept my
interests secret. I do not tell them to my family. Kids like me aren't supposed to like learning. I know who I am supposed to be: nice and simple and probably with a kid or two of my own by now. I was never supposed to leave, I was never supposed to go to college. But I did. And I have learned, slowly I have learned, that learning comes with me everywhere and that my voice matters in the learning. This is not the person I was supposed to have become. I have sat in so many rooms over the past four years repeating the same story: “The Pioneer Valley has ruined me. I have become the Valley.” I escaped from my home, but I have also become someone I never wanted to become. I have learned to talk about my favorite theorists and offer critiques. I have multiple pairs of snow boots and multiple heavy winter coats. Worst of all, I have come to love people who do not speak like me, who do not know the fear of being poor, who came to college speaking confidently and easily.

They keep asking me here, they ask me why I frame coming to college in a narrative of escape and not achievement, not rejection of my family culture as so many first-generation college students do, not a jolting culture shock (although it was). For me, first and foremost, college was an escape from my hometown, it was the only way. Eighteen years of my life were spent formulating a way out of Southern Indiana, and the last four have been spent putting together the pieces and creating a story for myself. This is not a story I am qualified to tell. I am a girl one generation removed from white trash. I grew up on breakfast dishes with lard bases and correcting my Mammaw's Appalachian English because I could not balance it on my own tongue. I am a few months away from a circular diploma from a New England liberal arts college that does not offer a major. I am a few months past cutting off all my hair and declaring to my mom with tears in my eyes, “I will never come back here.” I do not seek to forget where I come from, I just seek to escape. This is not a story I am qualified to tell. I do not follow an intellectualized narrative of working-class whiteness. I don't have a lot to
work with. This is not a story I am qualified to tell.

But let me try.

*

My mom does not like when I tell stories about home. She believes I tell hateful stories to the sons and daughters of people she is forced to fall silent in front of for embarrassment of language. My mom cannot say Massachusetts, it sputters from her mouth and ends in a curse—Massa-tu-shits. She tells me this is why she does not like me at school here, because the name of my adopted home cannot be spoken with a soft, kind tongue. It is not the rolling farms resting on the tip of your tongue when you say Indiana, it does not end in the soft smile of Luh-ah-vul. Most of the times she refuses to say it, she says, “That place” and something inside me collapses on itself. It reminds me each time that neither of these places are allowed to be my home.

My mom believes I cannot tell the story of home correctly. I will tell it with words she does not understand and to people she does not trust. Worst is when I complicate the definition of home—when I slip up and refer to Massachusetts as home, when she realizes we cannot share a place of permanence. I have only recently began verbalizing how neither place really feels like a home, that both feel like a liminal space between what I really am. Whenever I tell a story about who I am, it is deeply changed by experience in both places. I tell friends in Massachusetts a story of myself as a broke, sassy girl growing up in what is basically the South, with strange religious experiences and quiet stories of family abuse. I am careful, so careful with what I tell and do not tell. I am a carefully constructed persona in a land I am constantly unsure of. At home, I seek to prove that Massachusetts has not been able to change who I was before I left, although I fool no one. I adopt an accent my family does not speak—one I spend 6 months in Massachusetts remembering incorrectly and pining for—and I pretend
to hate everyone in New England. I roll my eyes at concepts I believe in. I want them to continue to recognize me as one of them. But four years away from a culturally insular community does change a person, while 18 years inside it has formed me into something that still seems impossible to translate to others who have not experienced Jeffersonville, Indiana.

My city is a hometown of in-betweens: North and South, city and suburbs, conservative and progressive, religious and secular, segregated and integrated. It is hard to find historical resources on where I live that do not center on Louisville or focus on the fossil geography of the Ohio River. My whole life I have been told that where I am from is the average: that we do not share the upsetting history of the South five minutes across the river, that we are a slice of what makes America both bland and beautiful. But everyone I know has always known a truth different than that. That we find our hometown haunted with the secrets of history, that our family stories are assimilated into narratives we never volunteered to be a part of, that Southern Indiana is the source of religions, frontier attitudes, and historically seeded racial resentment. I grew up never thinking where I was from was interesting or exceptional, and I have spent four years learning that I do not know anyone with a cultural identity similar to my own outside of where I am from.

Where I begin—with its brilliant people with sunken eyes, its air lit up with honeysuckle mid-summer—that is the story I have spent the last four years trying to tell. The education, the story I love to tell where my eyes lit up when I saw mountains for the first time, how I forgot to breathe when my eyes first set on the ocean in New Hampshire, where I watched the daughters of politicians and investors vomit and sob messily, where I learned to read theory and enjoy it—that comes later and is inseparable from the stories of those I grew up with, who formed the stories with me.

When my friend Sonia left for school this fall, I realized that if everything went
according to plan, she would never come back to our hometown after that moment. I knew I had a semester of field study to do at home and it caused a sense of panic that I have never really experienced before regarding being at home. It was the moment I realized that despite my connection to home that I also still felt trapped there. I wrote to her about the nearly-impossible concept of actually leaving forever once I finished field study and once we both graduated:

**August 4, 2012**

*What does it mean to never come back? Is it the escape we were always pining for? What does it mean to never come back? Does it hurt? The voice of your mom on the phone, emails from your brother. The twang entering through your lungs and out through your mouth, like cigarette smoke. Can you feel it? Do holidays count? To leave and never come back, to escape. Will I just fade to nothingness in the faces here, or will I disappear? What does it mean to never come back? Will I feel it? Will I cry like I did on the airplane that time, knowing how close I was to trying to leave, palm against the window? What does it mean? What does it mean to see the ocean for the first time when you're 18? What does it mean to fly? I keep telling her, I keep telling myself that you can't undo what's been learned. What does it mean to let go? They keep telling me I've lost touch with reality and I keep telling myself this is my new reality. I hold tight to my college words, a new black Bible, pages lined with gold. The trailers I have been in, pills covering tables. The uneven kitchen floors I have sat on, looking up as women were beaten with words and palms, letting a bouncy ball roll to their feet. What is the price of letting go? What is the reward?*

Poverty is certainly an aspect of why people attempt to remove themselves from their circumstances. And frequently, escaping poverty requires people to physically remove themselves from their communities. In a community of widespread poverty and jobs which only offer the continued prospect of low-income, leaving is sometimes the only option. However, for many of us—my own friends and likely others before me—the motivation to leave comes from places that are harder to talk about, such as cultural isolation or family abuse. And when the only avenues out of these circumstances appear as becoming famous or going away to college, the most accessible solution becomes to try desperately to make it to
The essay which originally engaged me in wanting to pursue the emotional reasons for leaving, for pursuing education, for the simultaneous fear and nostalgia for an impoverished home was anthropologist Christine Walley's autoethnographic work about her life in post-industrial Chicago. She writes about her father losing his job at a steel mill and her escape into private boarding school as a scholarship student. Her piece is beautifully written and emotionally raw, as well as thorough in its exploration of what the closure of factories meant to her Chicago neighborhood. Reading it for class on the bus one day, I actually began crying when I read her account of what it felt like to apply for and attend private boarding school in New England and her parents' reaction:

The idea of sending a child away to school, much less halfway across the country, seemed like an act of cruelty to many parents in Southeast Chicago. But there were deeper reasons as well. When I yelled at my father, who was then working temporarily as a janitor, and demanded that he told me why I couldn't go [to Exeter], he responded, almost in tears, “Because when you come back, you'll look down on me for being a janitor!”

Walley's description of this moment was all too familiar. My family's constant fear of my going away to college in the northeast, a land of which they can hardly conceive, has been that I will come back a different person, and that this person will “look down” on them. Since I began college we have constantly had to renegotiate our perceptions of each other—I have had to acknowledge that I come back to my home changed with a different lens on the world and they have had to acknowledge that much of the anxiety is insecurity and perception of an attitude that I do not exhibit. In fact, I always felt like I came back from college during each break as much less harsh on my hometown, the residents, and my family. Once I felt like I had gotten out, I no longer felt the need to hate it as I had in high school. I no longer felt like I was

better than it because I was no longer part of it.

Many of the personal essays in the anthology *Without a Net* involve stories of going away to college and the experienced dissonance between self, family culture, and school culture. Francis Varian writes in her essay about the fear that centers around remaining poor while also balancing the act of attending an elite college, she writes in the beginning:

And everyone I was born to orbits in the solar system of the punchclock. There was never a time when my face wasn't turned toward something greater than myself. Fear and poverty breed shame. Exhaustion and disappointment make everything taste bitter. The tired body cannot convince the racing mind to sleep. The sun will rise. Then we will work. These are things you know instinctively. Without money bad things will happen to you and you won't be able to stop them. The only way to get money is to work for it and there are only two kinds of work: smart or hard. You enter the world, pull for air, and wait for payday.²⁵

She continues by illuminating her experience at Vassar:

My entire life thus far had been a battle strategy to get me to this place. Everyone's resources were used in this endeavor and now I was on my own to navigate the Seven Sisters experience. The rules, language, and vantage point of the upper class are different from mine. They know very little about the lives of working-class and poor people. I watched my professors from one of the most liberal colleges in the United States walk past my father [who worked as a janitor at Vassar] like he was a polite ghost. Perhaps we are only interesting in theory.²⁶

Varian's personal essay has stood out to me because it illuminates so well and so concisely much of the experiences I have had throughout college. The experience of growing up in fear while living with the knowledge that your experience—as well as your way of speaking, thinking, and even something as small as eating—are worlds away from those who you are now considered equal to, your college peers.

At Hampshire I had a particularly hard time verbalizing these feelings of invisibility when it was paired with the social justice lens used on topics of poverty and class. Seeing my middle and upper class friends use a politeness that I viewed as overly-intentional with the

²⁶ Ibid., 164.
housekeepers in our dorms first year is a particular experience I'll never forget. I knew that they were scared; that despite remaining respectful, striking up conversations, and trying to keep spaces clean that they'd never really understand the life that this woman lead. I didn't tell anyone my first year that my mother was a custodian at a college, that this woman who students were being intentionally and overly nice to could be my mother if we were in Indiana.

The woman who cleaned our hallways and bathrooms every weekend was wonderful and nice, but I would imagine what she really thought of us—or if she really did think of us. I knew from my mom that her feelings towards students were mostly ambivalent. She was happy for students who were polite, but the real difference they made in her day were negligible. She cleaned their shit from toilets and complained about how messy professors kept their offices. Seeing a woman cleaning my living space at Hampshire was full of conflict for me: I did not want her to think I was like the rest of the students, but I also knew that she was in the building to do her job and get on with her day. I did not try to get to know her, I did not try to make her into a “person,” as a statement about the invisibility of school workers. She was a person. This is what my mom has done for nearly every day of her life since I was nine years old. I have walked the hallways of Indiana University Southeast with her, smelling the chemicals of her cleaning supplies and sitting in professors' chairs as she vacuumed on days she could not find a babysitter. The housekeeper's job is more familiar to me than my place in this school was first-year. When I saw her, I smiled, said hello, and remembered to not make more of a mess than I could prevent. She was not remarkable to me the way she was to many of the social-justice oriented people on my hall. It was not a political statement to be a decent person.

_Cause for Concern_

We were having an argument, as we always were about something that year. When I
look back on it, these are the moments that seem most obvious when I should have found new friends, or at least dropped a few friends from my life. I should have let them go, never looking back. But this was an experiment for me, these friends. I was learning how to communicate with the middle and upper class. And I was scared: even if I did stop being friends with this person who always insisted on arguing, wasn't this what rich people were? How would I ever get through school, get through my life now that I couldn't go back to being the same midwestern poor girl, if I didn't know how to make friends with the sons and daughters of the educated?

But this was really hardly an argument. It was a rant against my perceived shortcomings.

This was a friend, a close friend. That was her decision, not mine. I always kept her at a distance, I never told her what I told our other close friend Stephen. But still, we were a friend group—we spent much of our time together.

We sat on Stephen's bed and she started in. This was a space I had no right to speak in, this much she made clear. I remember being so angry about this, but I also remember not saying anything; I had normalized being silenced at some point and this was not about to be the time I made a dramatic change.

She was concerned for me.

This was not new. She was always concerned for me. My life, in all its struggles, with all its family troubles and all its drama concerned her. Even when something would happen and I'd confirm that it was of no concern to myself, she would insist it was concerning. Only in Massachusetts have I had people tell me what I should be concerned about regarding my own life. I have been told, “No Kayla, this is a big deal,” more times than I can count here. But the truth is my reality is not a big deal to me; that which concerns others is not frightening
or even particularly difficult for me.

This was about how I didn't tell her things about my life anymore. The reasoning to me was obvious: I would cause her no concern if I didn't tell her about my life anymore. However, apparently this was also concerning.

“Kayla, you don't even tell us anything! And you sleep all the time! And Stephen told me that you eat a lot of rice! That isn't healthy, Kayla. I'm concerned.”

That's right. I slept a lot and ate a lot of rice. I was a liberal arts student who didn't eat meat and ate a lot of rice. Clearly, my impoverished background was really getting the best of me. It couldn't possibly be the wonderful complete protein combining powers of rice, or even that I liked rice. It was that my family had never taught me how to eat. Obviously I had only been raised on processed food and McDonald's, and who knows what I did the five years I had eaten a balanced vegan diet on my own and managed to thrive in the southern midwest. No. I slept a lot and ate a lot of rice; I could not do this on my own. I needed concern.

I remember saying nothing, but cannot forget the distinct sensation of digging my fingers around Stephen's mattress and squeezing until I no longer had sensation in my fingertips. Only now can I look at it with humor and realize the absurdity.

But don't laugh. Don't laugh because this could be you. Rebekah did not realize the absurdity of what she was saying either. Rebekah was a compassionate, thoughtful though intense, social justice education-studying ideal Hampshire student. She studied racism, classism, sexism and was passionate about educating young students. She knew how these moments worked on paper as well as I did. But our lives are personal. And my life as I lived it—slowly, critically, frequently bitterly—was an attack on her middle-class ideals of individualism and hard-work in that which you are passionate.

I was also told that I was bad at using my own money. That when I got paid, instead of
immediately putting my money in a checking account, I would go out to eat. That instead of
eating rice and occasionally going out to eat I should be saving all my money, because I didn't
have the kind of money to spend so frivolously. This is how you prepare for your future, she
told me. This is how her mother had raised her from a young age, she said. You put your
money away, as if it is not your own. Your money belongs to your future.

“Money has never belonged to anyone's futures where I come from.” This time I
spoke. She thought I meant that I had been inspired by her idea. What she could never
understand is the power of culture surrounding money, the power I felt in simple consumption
with friends in my college town, the meaning to me of having spare money at all. My impulse,
then and even now, is to get rid of money as soon as possible. I do not trust it. I do not trust
myself with it. I do not want to be a person with money.

“But now it can! You're here now. Kayla, you don't have to be like your family.”

You don't have to be like your family.

But you do.

No one ever asked Rebekah to forget her family. Even though she complained
constantly about her overbearing mother, about how her mother destroyed her body confidence
and the pressures to concentrate in an acceptable field of study instead of her exact interests
were overwhelming and destructive. No one ever even suggested that Rebekah forget her
family. I had learned by then to never talk about my family, even though despite my conflicted
relationship with them they never caused me any pain while at school, but still the suggestion
was that I should forget about them. Become like people here. Become a person with money.
And they are mutually exclusive, even she knew that. To not be like my family would to be a
person who knows a life without economic struggle. To know a life without economic
struggle so early in my life would be an unnavigable world. I wouldn't be here if I wanted to
be poor forever. I wouldn't be here if my intent was to do everything as I have been raised to do them. But that is my process. That is my own story. To ask me to remove myself from the reality, to distance myself from who I am and how I know to live is unreasonable. It is also a violent act of privilege.

But it was only concern. It was only a friend who wanted better for me.

*White Trash*

We are arriving home from my Mammaw's, where I stayed for the weekend. I am probably about seven years old, since my parents are still married. We still have that boxy 1980s Caprice, a dulled mauve. My mom opens the trunk so I can get my Batman backpack and bring it inside. The rest of the trunk is filled with bags of clothes and cheesy Home Interiors prints that my Mammaw forced on us that she has collected at yard sales over the past few weeks. My mom picks up one bag to bring inside and my father sees us and immediately storms toward the car.

A trunk full of yard sale clothes, that's all it took. The first time I heard the accusation. My father stands at the trunk throwing the bags onto our gravel driveway. I watch, trying to understand.

“Beth, we don't need this shit! What the hell is wrong with you guys?! You're always bringing your white trash mother's shit into our this house!”

I stand back, watching, as I always do when my father begins these tirades. I watch the bags slam against the ground, gaze calmly into what they contain. Ill-fitting jeans and clothes bought for me that I will never wear to school, framed cliches that my mom will try to find a place for on our walls but ultimately throw away. White Trash.

We own white trash because it came from white trash. As if once it is touched, the dirt cannot be undone. If we touch anything inside the bags, we will become white trash. This I
understand. I understand in my father's language that to him, with each time my mom brings the bags of White Trash to our house, that he is reminded of what she really is.

But what is my father? Why is my Mammaw white trash, but his mother not white trash? I am not white trash, we are not white trash. This I understand. He is protecting us from it, throwing these bags on the gravel. How close we must've been this time, bags full of it in our trunk, interacting with my Batman backpack that I stole from my brother's forgotten toybox.

“This is trash, Beth! We're throwing it away, where it should've been all along!”

I am so concentrated on my father that I hardly notice my mother. She is not fighting him, but she is taking the bags as he throws them on the ground. My mom is quiet and certain, always. She is bringing the bags inside and I wonder what she will do with them to defy my father. Had he not thrown this fit, she would've thrown these bags away, I know this. We never keep the clothes, and eventually get rid of the pictures. But I know this time she will keep them.

I stand in the dried-out grass of late-Ohio Valley-summer, watching. I am not white trash, but I understand for the first time how close I am. I understand how easy it is to slip up. I will stay far from the bags my mom keeps, even while remaining proud of how she defies my father's easy fits. I have no choice. I am so close. Too close.

*

At the end of Varian's personal essay she explores the crisis that I'm all too familiar with, the recognition of difference with wealthy peers, but also with the fear that comes with escape. She states:

If I was so close to getting out, why was I still so afraid? Why did I want to leave the people who had been so good to me? The reality of my upper-class peers was so drastically different from my own—did I really want to become exactly like them?
And even if I wanted to, I knew it would be impossible. I could make millions of dollars and I would still wake up every morning searching for something greater than myself. I could transform myself into the most sophisticated intellect and they would still be able to smell my fear.27

I am still afraid. We are still afraid. College did not remove my fears or any of my friends' fears. If anything, it gave us more fear. We all realize now how hard it really is to “get out,” to find success through education, to become the well-dressed young professionals we dreamed of becoming in high school. We live in constant fear of not being “good enough” to succeed compared to our more privileged peers, yet we also live in constant fear of giving up where we came from, of losing our roots. Going into college, many of us were led to believe—falsely—that this was the end of our fear, that we had finally made it out. But this is not true, it is all more complicated than that. Having gained more capital than any generations prior to us, but less than many of those with which we attend class, what are we really left with?

This is a story of myself and my friends and it is the only one I know how to tell. I cannot tell it without feeling or as a distant observer. It is a story I am still living and have been writing since it began. There are hours of scrolling messages between my friends and I about how we got here and how we live it now that we are here. Getting this far has relied heavily on hearing the voice of others who have made it, who know the value in writing about it, who refuse to be quiet. I have wanted to tell these stories—and my own—since I got to college.

_A Helping Hand_

I had received a grant from the career center for an unpaid internship at home. They had originally awarded me one grant, but then called me in to tell me they were switching my

“Well, no one really qualified for this one who applied for the grants because it's for people of color and it requires a mentor, but you're from a disadvantaged background and you could benefit from a mentor!” The woman, with dull eyes and voice, tries to tell me enthusiastically. She then proceeds to try to get me to figure out who could be my mentor so I could qualify for the grant, even though I had originally received the other grant. But I need this money. I cannot do this internship without this money. I have not talked to my internship supervisor since she hired me; she is wonderful but she has not signed on to be a mentor to me.

I tell this woman, “Of course, of course, my supervisor, Jodi, yes, she's great, she's basically offered to do whatever she can so that I can get the most out of this internship.” This isn't untrue. But I wonder even then what would happen if I couldn't find a way to bullshit my so-called “mentor.” And why am I working so hard for this? I am so scared they will not give me the money, so scared. This internship, I know, is a way to make connections with people working in education outside of schools. I am panicked and desperate, as I always feel in college. I don't think they'll take the grant away from me, but I am still scared.

That day I sign the paperwork. I am not able to pick up the check until I send an initial letter to the donor, but first we are to send a draft which the center must proofread. When I come back in, the lady with the same dull eyes looks at me with lazy sadness. I hate her.

She pulls out my letter and pretends to look over it. I know she has already planned to say something despite her charade. She takes off her glasses, which fall to her chest since they are connected by a chain. She points out minor grammatical issues and I admit that I am guilty of a good comma splice or two on occasion. But it's not the comma splices she wants to talk about, it's my words. I had copied the sample thank you almost exactly, with some changes to make it personal and seem more genuine. This is what they had essentially told me to do. But
this did not change what she saw. The woman with the dull eyes and voice pointed out sentence after sentence that should be fixed. She said things like, “Wouldn't it be better if it said--?” and I shrugged and said “sure.” She crossed red ink over my half-hearted words and suddenly they mattered to me. She wrote her words over the top of the marked out sentences. It took a total of two minutes and negligible red ink to push me to the brink of tears.

“No one has ever said anything to you about your writing?” She asks, full of dull-eyed concern.

Oh yes, people have said many things to me about my writing. My writing has moved countless people to tears, my writing has made my teachers look at me differently. In elementary school, I would sit and write stories about girls from rough homes being saved by time machines and alternate universes as my best friends would draw horses to take them away. In high school, my writing solidified the “A’s I received after refusing to talk in class despite the 30% weight on classroom participation. I was reading and writing at an 11th grade level in 3rd grade according to my standardized test scores. My first year, when I actually never spoke any words in class—not even to friends I would get so nervous—my professors would gawk at me in meetings. They would pull out my essays and say, “I don't understand. You have such a strong voice here and I never hear it in class,” and I would smirk or laugh or sometimes even say, “It's just really hard for me talk in class, I don't know why.” Sending messages back and forth with my friend Sonia, we would both write back about how our writing was saving the other. My writing saves lives. My writing is sometimes the only voice I have.

I laughed to choke back tears. I knew she was wrong. This time, I knew. I managed to get out, “Actually no, all my professors tend to like what I write. I get good feedback and good grades.”
She doesn't believe me. That much is clear. Her lips roll up into her mouth. I think this woman must be the most tepid and idiotic person I've ever met in my life. I can't believe how wrong she is.


I'm trying to balance my disdain on top of my heartbeat which is demanding I leave. I know she thinks I'm stupid just because I wrote about needing the money because no one in my home could support me, because summer internships are my only chance of getting anywhere. That this is not really about my writing, this is about assumptions. I am briefly mad at myself for using my story to get things. But then she speaks again. She will not let it go.

“Well have you ever brought anything to the writing center? I just think someone should look at your writing. You know, people from underprivileged schools don't always learn to write like other people here. I grew up in Southern Ohio, of course I grew up with some privilege, but I know about the towns there and the education.”

What would happen if I just snapped the glasses-necklace from her neck right now, smashed the stupid piece on the floor and demanded her respect? What would happen if I marched out and told someone what was being said to me? What if I just told her the truth, if I said, “You're full of shit, I'm a better writer than anyone I know.” and left?

I stare back at her. I try to look as empty as possible. All I want is this money. $500. I will do anything for this $500. I smile pitifully. She types up her corrections without even asking for me to take it home and fix it. I stand up to leave and she smiles at me, her eyes lifeless and her face caving in on itself. I come back once, to the main desk to pick up my check. I imagine she thinks she benefited my disadvantaged education, gave me the tools to seek out help and cringe. I do not come back for the rest of my time at Hampshire.
My own story has become so complicated, and by my own doing. When I say this is not a story I am qualified to tell, I am speaking of an experience of never fully feeling qualified to tell anything of my experiences, of the feeling that no matter which story I tell there will be people from both home and school telling me that I am telling it wrong. And even if I tell as much as I can, while fully acknowledging that it is only my own experiences I can fully convey, I will never be able to tell the story to the extent that even I wish. I did not come to college intending for it to be so deeply emotional; I never thought that I wouldn't fit in. As a smart girl with a lot of feelings about how to make the world a better place, Hampshire made the most sense on paper. Hampshire was what I wanted, and despite the situations which have made me feel disillusioned on campus, there are times when I know that Hampshire is still the right place for me. It feels wrong to say, it feels wrong to write. But I mean it.

Walking through downtown Amherst with my best friend from home, Shay, she reminded me of a time I considered transferring from Hampshire. I had completely forgotten. How after first-year, I had felt so distant from the school that I looked into anywhere that could better serve me. I looked into schools which could offer, at the very least, self-inflicted diversity across class and race. I briefly considered transferring to Mt. Holyoke with Shay.

“Imagine! You could be living in the suite with me and Aparna! It would've been so nice!”

“Yeah, but staying at Hampshire was definitely the right choice. It's been horrible, and I'm so bitter, but I came away with so much.”

“There were times I really hated Mt. Holyoke too, but I just don't know anywhere else I would've been happier at.”
There are times I look at stacks of books I have on my bookshelf, and I think I know about all of the things inside of them—and I am so egotistically proud of myself. Yet there are also days that looking at those same books causes me a deep sense of sadness. I know about all of the things inside of them. Each book feels like a step away from my family. One more thing they are not interested in that deeply interests me. I have made my project so personal because there will always be something inside of me that seeks to make my experiences in education accessible to my family.

I have spent the last two weeks begging my brother to bring his step-daughter to my graduation, despite the annoyances of driving with a nine-year-old. She idolizes me, and I also love her because she reminds me of myself. She is a loudmouthed, opinionated tomboy raised in the country. She is also smart. The kind of girl both my family and her mom's family say, “That girl is too smart for her own good,” about. I begged him, bring her so she can see a world larger than Indiana. Bring her so she can see a college graduation. And as much as my brother also disapproves of the atmosphere he's observed at Hampshire, he knows. He knows that the purpose of my education is to make it possible for others.

Schools like Hampshire, like Mt. Holyoke and Depauw do not have to be locations of displacement for first-generation college students. They do not have to force students to forget the homes they come from or the values their families instilled in them. This is the only story I know how to tell anymore. The story of myself and my friends. The story of so much fear, but also of considerable pride and ambition. It is true that we are all working extra hard just to make it into college, and especially to make it through. But it is also true that we are destroying a wall for the youth around us. For each of my friends and I, this means increasing access to higher education and possibilities for the future through capital and increased income. Sonia dreams of sending her nieces and nephews to private school. I want my
brother's step-daughter to know that her interest in science can take her anywhere in the country. Additionally for me, it is important for me to increase access to options and future possibilities by working with youth in schools. And in many ways that makes the coming-and-going and translating worth it. It makes arguments with family and arguments with college friends worth it. If I have experienced this, someone else will not have to struggle as much. That it may one day be less difficult for those who want to attend college, that someday college-going won't be an act of forgetting or forgoing—that has been enough to get me through this experience, that has been enough to convince me to continue to learn. And that is why I'm telling this story—my own and those of my friends and current youth attending elementary school. To illuminate the complexities of the experience and the gap that many students still experience between their home lives and their school lives. This is not a story I am qualified to tell, but there is no one else more qualified to tell it. So tell it I must.
Chapter 2

Shay: Immigration and Upward Mobility

give your daughters difficult names. give your daughters names that command the full use of tongue. my name makes you want to tell me the truth. my name doesn't allow me to trust anyone that cannot pronounce it right. 

Dislocation and the Search for the “Right” Place

To tell the story of Shay's education, and the larger immigrant narrative that much of her story comes to represent, we will begin in Bellary, India—where Shay and her family lived until she was three years old. Bellary is a town in Southern India, small by Indian population standards with 409,644 residents in 2011. Her father received his B.A. in India and was an accountant. Her mother “has the equivalent of an associates degree” and was a teacher in India. Coming to the U.S., meant that their educational attainment in India held little weight.

Shay told me:

They...once they got here, a couple of my uncles were working at Jeff Boat. So I think the obvious assumption was that my dad would go to work, and my mom didn't go to work until I started, like, first grade. And like, she didn't speak English that fluently either. So my dad, he started work like the second day we were there, at Jeff Boat.

Jeff Boat is one of the largest employers in Jeffersonville; it is the largest inland shipbuilder in the United States and although the work is frequently dangerous, it is a well-paid, unionized manufacturing job. Shay's dad worked his way up from janitor to welder at Jeff Boat. This hard work is considered to be worth it for their children to have access to what is perceived as the superior education in the United States.

29 Census Commission of India, “Census of India 2001: Data from the 2001 Census, including cities, villages and towns (Provisional).”
30 Shaheeda Haq, from an interview on July 14, 2012. All quotes from interview, unless otherwise specified.
31 American Commercial Lines, “Manufacturing.”
When Shay's family first moved to the United States they lived in downtown Jeffersonville. In the middle of kindergarten they moved from the “inner-city” school she attended to a more suburban community school. Her first school, Walnut Ridge Elementary School is located in a neighborhood that is historically black. Regardless of the fact that Walnut Ridge has nearly always performed higher on standardized testing than most schools in Jeffersonville, it is regarded by white residents outside of the community as a “bad school” due to the neighborhood in which it is located. When her family later moved into a suburban neighborhood across town, she attended Riverdale through elementary school and remained in this home until eleventh grade. She tells of this experience:

Like in preschool, I was different, but like, I don't know if I didn't have an understanding of it, a self-consciousness of it yet, but I didn't feel like I was being ostracized for being different, like racially different or culturally different. But then I got to kindergarten, at Riverdale, and the first day I was there, I was starting, and I started in the middle of the year...I didn't start in like August or whatever—and the teacher was like, “Class this is our new student,” and like we all sat in a circle and stuff. And she was like, “Class this is our new student and her name is Sha-hee-da Cocanut.” And like, the entire class burst out laughing. And I started crying, because I was like, I'm being laughed at. I don't know why I'm being laughed at, but I'm being laughed at. Because like, before then no one laughed at my last name. I didn't feel like it was a weird thing.

This experience of difference would stick with Shay all throughout schooling, the experience of feeling different, of something about her being laughable or a joke. Shay attributes the difference in treatment between Walnut Ridge and Riverdale to her growing awareness as “different,” however, even though Shay as an Indian-American would still be “different” in an African American community, she was not recognized as different. In a majority-white space however, Shay's brown body was read as essentially different than theirs. She was never laughed at while attending Walnut Ridge, however at Riverdale—a school located in a mostly-white suburb—she was laughed at on her first day of school because of her name.
What's in a Name?

Each of the children in Shay's family were named by their family, given a name in Urdu—a language similar to Hindi but written in Arabic script. Their names are not only Muslim names, but they are Muslim names with roots in India; their names speak to an entire family history and cultural heritage. Her name is not said easily on a tongue that only speaks English, and yet she has spent much of her school life apologizing for it. When I met Shay, she was already going by Shay instead of Shaheeda—the years between kindergarten and 7th grade had cemented her name and identity as foreign and impossible. Shaheeda was let go for Shay, perhaps thoughtlessly, easily, in an effort to stop having her original name butchered and nervously contemplated on classroom rosters on the first day of class. I've watched Shay watch teachers as they have gone down class lists; at the moment of hesitation she will sigh, raise her hand and say, “That's me, you can call me Shay.”

And until 7th grade, Shay's last name was indeed Cocanut—the source of endless jokes. It was the name written on forms by her uncle when he first came to the United States. She states of the name with which she came to America:

We got the name Cocanut because my uncle filled out our paperwork and my dads great grandfather was a coconut merchant but then my great grandfather was a potato merchant and we were known in Bellary for both but my uncle chose our last name as Cocanut because I think it's a name we went by.32

Not until the middle of 6th grade did she legally change her last name to Haq, her family name and the name they held prior the coming to the United States. Her name change, according to the 6th grade team of teachers we both had, garnered an end-of-the-year award since she was “no longer a Cocanut.”

Many people have names that they don't like or names that people make jokes out of,
but I have never met someone who has had their name so strategically taken from them like Shay's has been. A name to many may only be a name, but to refuse a name, to ridicule a name because it does not roll off the tongue easily or does not seem favorable, to make a name so exhausting for the person who has it that they choose a name from thin air that is decontextualized from who they are—that is a form of violence. A name is a home. And for Shay, a name is not only a home from which she has been forcibly uprooted, it is a name that was already distanced from its original context. Her name is a symbol of the attempts at forcible assimilation in the American school system. She lives one public life, one home life.

It's just like, that's the crazy part, because like you go to school and everybody is just so—I don't know—they were just so hostile and, like, afraid I guess, like in elementary school. And I would go home and help out with my family and stuff, in a very Muslim and Indian household and stuff and in the culture I was brought up in, and it was very hard to understand what was going on. Because I didn't really have an understanding of how to like, of how to balance those cultures...or like, how do I live in both cultures because everyone else I know in school is only living one.

And still, all these experiences of difference were exacerbated with the events of September 11, 2001—when “Islamaphobia” not only became a word in the everyday vernacular of households across the United States, but also—in many cases—an accepted form of bigotry. Even as Shay's best friend, who was there for many of the horrible incidents she experienced in school after September 11th, I never really viewed her as a victim of bullying in the framework that bullying is typically portrayed. She was never dirty or socially inept. She was just a brown Muslim girl—and no one really knew she was Muslim, she didn't wear a hijab or any of the other signifiers of Muslim femininity and “repression” with which we had become familiar following September 11th. She was always, to me, a nice and quiet girl who people senselessly attacked. I did not think through the cultural systems that allowed for this harassment; I did not even really expect a reaction from teachers. I was only mad and I hated to see my best friend pretending to not be upset. But what could she do, really? And if she did
do something, we all knew the underlying truth to much of what was going on: that even many of our teachers sympathized more with the bullies than Shay, although they wouldn't condone the physicality or loudness of their actions.

Schildkraut synthesizes a number of surveys taken regarding Americans' perceptions of Muslims directly following September 11th, and while none speak to the majority of Americans, the numbers are still chilling:

In a *Time/CNN* poll taken shortly after 9/11, 31% of respondents said they would favor allowing the federal government “to hold Arabs who are U.S. Citizens in camps until it can be determined whether they have links to terrorist organizations.” Similarly, 32% of respondents in a *Newsweek* poll said that the United States “should put Arabs and Arab-Americans in this country under special surveillance...” In an ABC News/Washington Post poll taken 1 month after 9/11, 44% of respondents said they support giving the police the power to stop anyone who “appears to be Arab or Muslim” at random, 28% said that being Arab or Muslim should be an important part of the profile of being a terrorist, and 39% said that they have been personally more suspicious of people they “think are of Arab descent.” Given the obvious social undesirability of these responses, it is likely that the number of people supporting them is actually higher.33

And while it is true that numbers like these did drop in the months and years following 9/11, much of the fear and stigma regarding those who were Muslim or even “looked” Muslim remained.

Why else would people still refer to Shay a terrorist in middle school and even high school? In our interview she told me about an instance of hate in high school, which actually brought her to tears in the interview. She comments:

In high school, I thought it would stop, because people say when you get to high school no one cares anymore, like that. I didn't think that way because like, and this is the most painful memory I have, like I was fasting and it was gym class and I wasn't excused from gym class. I was fasting and, I don't know, I didn't have a doctor's note? And they couldn't give me a whole month off for not doing anything. So like, I was in gym class and I was fasting and I didn't have anybody I knew...during that class and there was this guy who basically came up to me and was like, they were really harassing me and basically they came up to me and sat really really close to me and

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shoved me and made fun of me. And like, I just, I didn't even know how to react because I've never said anything back to anybody when they made fun of me because I didn't know what to say, so I just ignored them. Because ignore them and they'll go away, I'm better than this, I'm better than them to try to fight back with them, but like I didn't do anything, I just sat there. And they were bothering me so much and they were calling me names like terrorist and stuff like that and it...and it just hurt so much because I was fasting and I was already very, very weak...Because one thing, you're physically drained and then emotionally you're hurting somebody.

One of the worst moments of being made to feel like an outsider for Shay was in high school a time when “no one cares anymore.” Having expected to find those who no longer cared about her race or religion in the high-population of Jeffersonville High School, she was actually faced with one of the most hurtful moments of her life. It is the combination of what was said and done to her, along with the fact that this happened during Ramadan when she does not eat from sun up to sundown—paired with the school system's disregard of this holiday during gym class—that made this particular moment stand out to Shay. On top of this, this moment was one of the few moments, as she recounts, that she was left alone to deal with the behavior of the people who made fun of her. Weakened by not eating for the entire day, and doing what she'd always been taught to do, Shay simply tried to ignore them. When this didn't work, she is left with a story that she had not even told to me until the interview. There was no one to tell; no one would do anything about it as she had come to find out from years of inaction on the part of the school.

*To live in diaspora is to be haunted by histories that sit uncomfortably out of joint, ambivalently ahead of their time and yet behind it too. It is to feel a small tingle on the skin at the back of your neck and know that something is not quite right about where you are now, but to know also that you cannot leave. To be un-homed is a process. To be unhomely is a state of diasporic consciousness.*

So much of Shay's interview centered around her feeling as if she were different, that it is impossible to ignore in this essay. Shay's sense of difference and discrimination in her

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school spaces was the impetus for her searching out schools far away. However, she also knows that her achievement in school is wrapped up in her family's own upwardly mobile ambitions as immigrants in the United States. Shay grew up fighting the difference she felt in school. She explains over and over again how she realizes she could not fit into the white, middle-class ideologies which construct the school system through which we both moved. She describes the experience of observing Ramadan as a particularly emblematic experience:

> When I started fasting for Ramadan and not eating lunch and [laughing] pretending to eat lunch. I would sit with my friends because you have to go to lunch, you can't not go to lunch, like you gotta go to lunch. And then sitting there and I would bring a lunch, and I wouldn't get lunch, and just sitting there with them and them being like, “Why aren't you eating?” So after a while—maybe I shouldn't be saying this—but after a while, I took a couple bags of food with me and then I would pretend to eat them. And then I remember in the beginning, when I first started fasting, in second grade and it was really hard for me because I'd wanna just fit in and eat with the rest of the kids and so, I would. And I'd break my fast and have this huge amount of guilt because I broke...like, did something really really wrong.

While it may seem like a number of small instances that created this situation of experiencing Ramadan in the public school, Shay's quickly retrieved knowledge of this means that it is an experience that sticks with her. On top of being visibly different from her classmates, observing Ramadan meant that she was to take part in a religious tradition that no one around her participated in nor even understood. Having her religious observance judged and ridiculed caused Shay to either hide her activity or even to break her fast despite her dedication to it. While this is one instance of many, it illustrates the push-and-pull between cultures that Shay experienced daily and caused her to feel as if she could never really belong to either.

*From Louisville to Hogwarts*

The distance Shay traveled to attend Mt. Holyoke begs the question of why? Certainly Shay could have found a liberal arts college in the midwest or South; there are many and they hold a great deal of prestige. Yet, if there is anything I have a lens into when it comes to
Shay's life, it is the college process. Both of us began looking for a way out around sophomore year. I discovered Reed College first, after they sent me information when I scored highly on my PSATs. We crowded around that viewbook—it smelled so good, the pictures illustrating a life of sheltered intellectualism and Oregon hipness. I was excited at first, but the idea of hiding away in a room studying all day completely bored me. However, this engaged Shay to a degree I will never understand. It was this popularized image of “going away to college” and what those specific colleges look like that seems to have attracted Shay to the schools she applied to and to Mt. Holyoke, where she currently attends:

I think the main thing was, I wanted to go to school where it was gonna be interesting. And, you know, away from here. I think that was like the main motivation, was like away from this place, away from these people who clearly don't get me. And like, try to go to a school...because I wanted to go to a school that was like what I thought college to be like. Or like, a bit like what it looks like in the movies! Which is stupid, but you know just like, where you live in the dorms and you go to class and you're learning...you know like, you sit in a class and your eyes open wide and they just like, they show you some beautiful...like, really cheesy stuff. But like you learn so much and it just gives you chills because what you're learning is so great and I'd have fantasies about that...

Shay was, in many ways, attracted to the prestige that schools like Mt. Holyoke and Reed would bring to her, as well as the education she felt she would receive from them that she would not receive at home. Schools “like in the movies” do not exist in the lower midwest; they exist primarily in New England. Schools with ivy growing on the brick buildings, with intense and small classes where people have revelations about intellectual ideas, those are confined to the New England Ivy League and perhaps the Seven Sisters. Shay ended up at a Seven Sisters college, Mt. Holyoke.

Mt. Holyoke is a pristine, Gothic campus. There is indeed ivy growing along brick and stone architecture. The school has an endowment of 582.6 million dollars.\textsuperscript{35} It is historical

and has alums such as Emily Dickinson and Lucy Stone. Today, the school has its diverse, international college population and liberal politics to brag about to attract students. It is, undoubtedly, the school Shay felt as if she wanted to attend when she was applying to schools. When she describes first seeing it, it is impossible to doubt her passion for the school she attends:

It's just like, crazy, the school is beautiful, how could you not want to go? It looked like freakin' Hogwarts to me when I got there and people did not give a fuck. I'm not kidding, people did not. And it was just the way that people dress...The way people dress also blew my mind because it was so cool, it was so not the conventional way people dress...And the food, the food was so good too. Okay, so I know exotic is used for like, India, but this food felt exotic to me. Because in Blanchard they had like portabella mushroom balsamic vinegar sandwiches and for breakfast and stuff they had every kind of cereal and gourmet chocolate chip pancakes. I was in Wilder, and the dining hall was so beautiful and the way the wallpaper and everything was and it was just like, this place...I'm gonna sound way nerdy, but I remember reading in Harry Potter—the Sorcerer's Stone, the first book—and J.K. Rowling describes when Harry first comes into the Great Hall and he sees it, he sees Hogwarts and stuff, and that's how I felt...It felt very idealistic and like this very magical place to me.

In fact, much of Shay's impression of the college she wants to attend seems to revolve around the media portrayals of academia. When she describes her interests in college she describes the colleges she wanted to attend most as “like the movies”—schools with old architecture and learning where “your eyes are open wide and they show you some beautiful...like really cheesy stuff.” For Shay, as well as myself and other friends as well, media cannot be forgotten in the discussion of how we found ourselves applying to colleges which we would have no exposure to otherwise. For Shay, it was a movie-like image of a college campus that drew her to Mt Holyoke. Sonia and I both relied on the internet a great deal to research college campuses and move between college websites that suggested “related colleges.” In thinking through culture in the twenty-first century, the influence of media cannot be ignored.

In her writing about ways of doing post-modern ethnography, Margaret Eisenhart brings to life the issue of how when conducting youth or school ethnography, a researcher can
no longer simply view “culture” of youth as between home, school, and community—that
culture, increasingly, is a site between time and space through mass media and internet. She
complicates researching culture as, “exploring the connections among the sites that together
make up arenas of social practice, such as among the households, schools, extracurricular
activities, personal relationships, TV shows, video games, and transportation networks that
connect up or intersect to form the contemporary context of youth activity.”36 Our conceptions
of college possibilities were opened up by the existence of media. Without that which is
available outside of our tangible locations of culture, we would have relied on school
counselors solely to expose us to colleges that would have been available, and our ideas about
where we “fit” would have varied greatly. Shay, although her family always intended for her
to attend college, would not have had access to as much information without forms of media
such as the internet. While other students from wealthier schools or from families with alumni
connections may have had access to private, liberal arts colleges away from home due to a
wider network.

Despite the determination to attend Mt. Holyoke and the conviction that it is the right
place for her, Shay has not been without her struggles at Mt. Holyoke—because she is a first-
generation college student but also due to the construction of cultural diversity on campus.
There has undoubtedly been a learning curve to her participation on campus. Even during the
summer before her senior year at Mt. Holyoke, Shay still admitted to having insecurities in
segments of classroom life. She admitted to feeling as if her wealthier peers with more
exposure to educational structures similar to Mt. Holyoke in high school, such as elite
boarding schools like Exeter held an explicit advantage to her. She talks of using Mt. Holyoke
courses during the beginning of her time as learning experiences, taking classes which she had

36 Margaret Eisenhart, “Educational Ethnography past, Present, and Future: Ideas to Think With,” Educational
no previous knowledge of:

You know, because if I'm not so knowledged about something in a subject, I'm not gonna do so well. Like if I don't have background knowledge on a subject, I'm working twice as hard as other people are, who've taken AP classes in this, who've retained a lot of the information they've learned and who...for them this is like a repeat of it, who are fulfilling requirements or something like that, you know? But I definitely think that I wasn't...you know, something as simple as writing...I struggled with writing and how to write, and it's just because the format was different. I definitely think that...and those are things you learn in high school, like you learn to write in high school, you learn to write an essay in high school, but I learned that in college, you know?

She goes on to state that many of the students in science classes had already done work in labs in high school and how this simply was not something she had access to in high school, both at Jeffersonville High and her better-resourced suburban high school in Louisville. She compares herself with those in her classes:

These people were so headstrong...It was just like, asking questions and raising your hand and talking out in class, being that confident in yourself to like, just go for it. Which is something I really struggle for. I took a first-year seminar and 20 percent of our grade was class participation and I was always the one that never spoke. Because I never had to do that. The teacher would call on me and I'd be like, “Oh my god, what do I even say?” And slowly, slowly, like I still struggle with it because it makes me so anxious to talk out loud in front of people because it's just really anxious because I never had that, from kindergarten to twelfth grade I never had that experience where class discussion was encouraged. Or even allowed. And that's what Mt. Holyoke is about. And it just felt like the majority of people in those classes, in my classes, had that, had immunity to that, like class discussion was not a big deal, it's not even a second thought.

It is also important to note that while Shay has had the opportunity to connect with much of the diversity through international students offered by Mt. Holyoke, there has been additional conflict when it comes to many of her friends' practices of Islam compared to her own. During our interview, she mentioned how many of her friends during first and second year would want to go to parties, and that these friends came from all over, that this was not just her secular American friends. Shay, especially during her first and second year, had many Muslim friends from across the globe and many of these friends challenged her understanding
of Islam because they would drink, smoke, date, and party. Once again, she found herself looking for how to consolidate her identity with her school experiences—this time, even with Muslims.

Like here, it was like even my Muslim friends were very laid back and very liberal, and stuff like that. And then it was hard for me to find a way that I fit into all this because, I guess it came back to, how do I navigate my values, and my religion and my culture, in a whole new setting, it felt...And it's not like everybody went to college parties, but the people I hung out with did. And so like, I experienced...I went to those parties and I did those things, and a part of me wasn't very happy doing it because it's not something I really like to do, but I still experienced it.

Shay, as an American Muslim, came to the school expecting the same behavior from Muslims across the country. Only to find that frequently the Muslims who were from Islamic countries were much more “liberal” in the religion than she was. Shabana Mir emphasizes that it is common for immigrant daughters to experience stronger cultural expectations than sons do. She also comments that in the United States, Muslims’ “difference” to Americans becomes the defining factor of their culture: “‘Muslim' norms are seen as diametrically opposed to U.S. norms. In the new terrain, immigrant parents emphasize key norms of difference to keep all majority norms from seeping in.”

Shay, having come to Mt. Holyoke in part because of its diversity, and in hope of finding culturally similar acquaintances, found in her friends another realization of her own diasporic existence. As an immigrant to America, her family emphasized culture that may not have been so important had they remained in India. This remains a reminder of why Shay has a life in the United States: it is not to become more American, it is not to make American friends—it is to do better for her family and to honor their decision to move to this country despite its struggles.

Despite its challenges for Shay, Mt. Holyoke also offers her immense privilege—both within greater society but also in her position with her family. Shay as the youngest daughter

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and for her conservative Muslim family; it is unusual that she would leave the home before marriage. Yet her parents, in their support for her education, encouraged her to follow her dreams.

I told my dad, I was like, “This is my dream,” and he was like, “Okay.” I think that, in the sense, it was also a thing of pride because not only was I doing something that was completely out of the ordinary for my family—not just my immediate family, but my extended family—like, no girl, no girl had left her home at such an early age to go to college, so far away from home. And it felt like I was doing something really revolutionary I guess. Because my dad, whenever he would meet someone, at a store or a family friend, he'd be like, “My daughter, she's going to school in Massachusetts.”

And while her parents may not exactly understand the prestige of Mt. Holyoke as an institution, they too know of media representations of New England college campuses, that family and friends who do know about “good” colleges, say that Mt. Holyoke is a good college. It is important to her family that if she has gone away that she is not going away just to go away; she is going away for an education, and that education is one she cannot get closer to home. Even though the truth of the matter is that Shay could likely get an equivalent education at one of the more prestigious liberal arts colleges in the midwest, the name Mt. Holyoke does stand out to members of the community and the name matters in Shay's family.

Shay is not Sonia or I; she has family and close family friends who have gone onto college, who offer her advice on colleges and career choices—however unsolicited this advice may be. Although Shay's family at home hold working-class jobs, her family has always had upwardly mobile ambitions. They moved from their 1970s suburban home in Jeffersonville to the East End of Louisville to buy a new home in a middle-class neighborhood. And while the home is an economic struggle for their family, the fact that the combined income of her parents can allow them to maintain the ownership of the home places Shay into a somewhat different lifestyle than I will ever know. When she first moved into her new home in high school, I would panic driving into her neighborhood with its matching brick homes and expensive cars.
I would make fun of her family's need to “appear rich,” even though the people living in Shay's neighborhood could hardly be called rich by most outsiders' perspective. It is a neighborhood of teachers and police officers who have enough combined income to afford a suburban home in Louisville, Kentucky where housing is fairly affordable. However, moving in high school meant Shay had additional resources in her new high school—regarded as one of the best traditional public high schools in Kentucky. She tells about the comparison of her experience between Jeffersonville High and Eastern. Speaking of her experiences at Eastern she says:

And so it's like of course you're gonna go to college, that shouldn't be a struggle, that's just expected. You know? Like we always had these college fairs and stuff like that. You know like all the Kentucky schools came in our gymnasium, and so all the schools came your senior year, we took time out of class to go and look at schools and see where you wanted to apply and stuff like that. And then also another thing that our school did was everybody, your junior year of high school—they pay for it—took the ACT. So everybody took the ACT...It was like all the classes were canceled and you just did the ACT...What does that mean, like that basically just screams it, they're expecting everyone to go to college. Like, the school is providing us the exam.

Shay has been pushed her whole life to seek upward mobility through education. Her family's working-class lifestyle in the United States will be made worthwhile if she can make something of herself through our educational system. Min Zhou states on the use of school as a practice of mobility for immigrants:

Attending school—attaining knowledge and skills that may be capitalized upon in future labor markets—is a crucial first step in successful adaptation to American society for immigrant children and children of immigrants. In the United States where public education is readily available to all children and where education and where education is traditionally accepted as the main means to social mobility, schooling often comes to occupy a central place in immigrant aspirations.38

Shay has been told throughout her life that being a doctor is the ultimate form of success.

Being a doctor requires extensive and intense education, and it is widely known that doctors

are wealthy. Having originally felt pulled away from the profession, she tells a story of how she eventually came to find interest in medicine through anthropology—and the importance of connecting it to her family:

**Kayla:** Is it important to you to make your [education] personal?

**Shay:** Definitely. I think this is something like my religion, my culture, I think, and my background, has been a very core part of who I am, and what I like, like how I see the world. And so, how I've come to form my own identity, you know? And so, just based on how I've come to America at such a young age and how I've had to come from a traditionally Muslim, Indian family and have those cultural values on me, as well as going to school and trying to fit in, like trying to find a balance between those two. And that's what gets me so interested, like, how does my family do it? In medicine, because that's what I like to study. But how do they do that in medicine, which is such a thing that people have a hard time even thinking about because it's so over their heads sometimes, that's something I'm really interested in, because everyone has a view for getting ill, getting sick. And everyone has a view for how to treat someone. And how does my family balance those things, how do they, living an American...after 20 years, their ideas still have not changed...yet, have changed. You know, it's a paradox.

Shay combines her interest in medicine with a pursuit for the truth of her cultural life and background. When she speaks of her family's views on medicine, she speaks of the belief in her family of the biomedical world of medicine in the West, while also believing in nazar, or the Evil Eye causing illness when someone feels envy or jealousy towards the person who becomes ill. Her senior independent study focused on how her family navigates the belief in both, as well as she herself as a college student studying medicine and anthropology understands these concept in combination in her own life.

Being pre-med means that Shay is given a good deal of admiration in her family, however being pre-med also means Shay is faced with a series of challenges she might not otherwise face. As someone who majors in anthropology and is on a pre-med track, she has often felt that she has not had the type of preparation that those who were able to take college-level science courses in high school and who had actual lab experiences.
In her role at home before college, Shay was the “quiet” daughter, yet her ability to even attend college comes from the fact that as the youngest daughter she has frequently been able to do things that the other members of her family cannot. Her brother works a great deal to supplement their parents' income so that the siblings can afford to do fun things. As a whole, all the siblings also expect of themselves—it is not an explicit demand from their family, it is simply the knowledge that they *should*—to help their parents in whatever way they can. As supplemental income, Shay's parents cater Indian parties and events which requires a great deal of time and preparation. Shay and her siblings, when at home, will help with the preparation of food and will clean around the house. Her brother and sister have stayed at home throughout college, and accept that they will remain there until they are married, has allowed Shay to have the privilege of actually leaving home to go to college. Even though the family is missing an extra person to help out with essential tasks, they can make do. However, it would not have been possible for all three siblings to leave home. Since Shay is the last to go to college, she has had the opportunity to be more picky over where she would attend college. In other words, in terms of education, Shay has had more freedom than her other siblings. Because of this freedom, Shay also tends to get more clout within her extended family—for being the smart one, for being hardworking and dedicated.

One of the most difficult struggles for Shay is the movement between home and school, as it is for many college students—first-generation college students in particular. In the liberal arts college environment, on top of attending an all-women's college, Shay has embraced feminist ideas and often speaks from an academic perspective on cultural and religious thought after majoring in anthropology. This movement of ideas between school and home has resulted in conflicts with her family and also can make relating to those with whom she attends
school difficult. Going home, it is as if she has become snobby and too liberal for her brothers and sisters. At school, there is danger in becoming too involved in the abstraction of ideas from their context that academia seems to demand. Even if she is working hard to consolidate her cultural experiences with her academic experiences, the analysis of herself and her family often requires a distancing of self from the cultural norms which she has been raised. And while this experience is not necessarily bad, it places Shay in a difficult position that she did not prepare for when she left for college: will education ultimately force Shay out of the fabric of her family's life even when she is able to claim her culture without assimilation in academia?

Although certainly not in the same context, it is worth viewing some of Shay's experiences and ideologies through the lens of relationality instead of the Western conception of individuality. Lynn Morgan and Beth Conklin's ethnographic work on the formation of personhood does a good job of summarizing the differences. Western individualism focuses on the body of a person as an individual entity; it belongs to the person who was born with it and the person exists as soon as they are born. “Personhood in many non-Western societies has been described as following a more relational, or sociocentric, cultural model. Rather than being an autonomous individual, the person exists in an explicitly valued set of constitutive social relations.”39 For Shay, even though she has had the opportunity to leave for college that her brother and sister have not, she now feels the pressure of achieving well for her family. When Shay does not score well on an exam or a paper, the first things that spring to mind are not that she will not be able to achieve her dreams, but that her family sent her to Massachusetts so she could carry the family's dream of education and success—if she does not do well, she is not failing herself, she is failing her family.

Shay's selfhood tied into her family may not be the experience of all students who are the first in their family to grow up in America, or even for Muslim South-Asian students. However, there is an application of this intense pressure to the lives of many first-generation college students: that your success is not just your own. Her determination to graduate from a selective, private liberal arts college that is not always receptive to her educational or cultural background, in order to become a doctor, is representative of the narrative her parents have created for their life in America. It is a heavy weight for Shay. If she does not succeed, not only is she failing in her parents' dreams for her as an individual, but she is also failing them and betraying the reasons they came to the United States in the first place. For Shay the question always exists: if I don't succeed, why did my parents leave their comfortable lives in India anyway?

*Escape and Family Uplift*

The life I live in my hometown with my family is incredibly different than the life at home that Shay lives. Yet while our experiences of “difference” in our own schooling experience come from different roots of displacement, we united ourselves to find routes of escape. While Shay sought out idealized college campuses, with academic buildings covered in ivy and beautiful New England autumns, I actively sought a space that presented open-curriculum and critical thought as philosophies. We did not apply to colleges with the hope of being close to each other, although when we were both given the best financial aid packages from colleges located a free, twenty-minute bus ride from each other, we were certainly excited to see our futures unwrap together.

Shay has struggled with bringing her culture into a “diverse” educational experience which claims to invite this, but it is difficult even in that space. For Shay however, the
experience at Mt. Holyoke has been a way of removing herself from much of the blatant and hateful discrimination that she experienced in Jeffersonville and Louisville. The importance of Shay's experience interwoven with her family's is also of the utmost importance. Not only is Shay attending Mt. Holyoke for its idyllic New England campus, she is also doing this to represent her family and to work toward the dream they've established regarding her own success as well as what it means to leave India and come to America. Shay's college aspirations and performance are as much her family's as her own.
Chapter 3

Sonia: Translation of Gated Spaces

August 6th, 2012

I started leaving the moment I returned home. I finally made it back to school. My first night here I did not sleep. Too much conversation. And Cheyenne's poetry. Cooked food in a clean kitchen. Sweet tea and Southern fare. Good souls ruminate before a grand spread.

I didn't realize how tense I was until I got here. Til I could exhale. Til I could feel myself breathe. Last night I slept in my own bed in this blessed house. Sounded without fear. The scraps of nightmares banished by another night of food and spirits.

I have porch swing. I swung. Thought about how this is how I want to be at the end of my life. A porch swing, sweet tea, summer air that lets you ruminate, and children playing in the yard. Laughter is a protector of homes. We are planning Sunday dinners... We all know the sacredness of sunshine. 40

I have known Sonia since we were ten years old, although we have not been friends for all of those years. I arrived at Bridgeport Elementary School from my rural hometown and spent a year not knowing how to make friends in the city. Sonia was in my class. We were not friends, but she was one of the few people who made an effort to talk to me. Sonia and I have never really been friends, not until we both went to college and came back disconnected and disoriented after our first year. We have spent years in the same classroom, barely acknowledging each other. She will tell the story much differently than I will; she tells me the story sometimes. Of how I was barely in her periphery, just another white girl in honors classes, alright but unimpressive. I have told her all my stories of how I felt my life in such conflict to her, upset with comments she would say about my life that I felt were rude and dismissive of my experience. We are not natural friends. We are friends born of necessity.

Our friendship is built on the River. Most friendships in our area are formed in neighborhoods or school hallways, but our entire friendship exists outside of our hometown. Sojourners in our home, we have found refuge in our shared experience of leaving. We have

40 Sonia Ross, from her personal journal, August 6, 2012. Used with permission.
loud, disjointed conversations with our feet in water that is touch-at-your-own-risk; the Ohio River is polluted and ever-present in our friendship.

Returning from home after our first year of college, we spent our first day together driving through our hometown and across the river into Louisville—it was 95 degrees in May. I can never forget this day, it is the cementing day of our friendship. Sitting at the park on the waterfront, we talked of how strange it was to be here after being away for so long, how hard it was to translate our lives back and forth. How after a year away from our homes, we had become accustomed to talking and it was hard learning to be quiet again. That once we had learned to talk about our experiences, to think about our experiences, it was hard to shut up about them. It was the first time we had acknowledged our shared history of familial abuse. Sitting along the Ohio, we looked each other and said, “The silence,” and both started crying. We had learned in college an important lesson that no one in our lives had had the opportunity to learn: that our survival was not predicated on silence.

We left the River, drove across the Ohio to Indiana and watched as dandelion fluff fell to the ground as if it was snow. We wrote together at the Falls of the Ohio for hours. Since then, our friendship has been bounded with our shared experience both as survivors and escapees. Sonia's story is a difficult story for me to tell, but she has trusted me with it. I am grateful to be able to tell it in whatever way I can, fully aware of how the differences in our experience across—primarily—race and religion affect the ways in which I can interpret what she has told me for the purpose of my project.

None of the previous story was in the interview I had with Sonia. Our interview was tangential but nearly all on the subject of family and schooling. There are things you miss in an interview, even with a good friend—perhaps especially with a good friend. Their feelings, the devastating moments in their histories become narrativized. Even in the most emotional
moments of the interview, I was left wanting her to elaborate on how she came to such stable thoughts on herself and her process as a college student. Yet, what I learned the most from Sonia's interview about moving between home and school is her knowledge that sometimes in our conversations we cannot avoid what is lost in translation.

_A Litany for Survival:_

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

Background

Sonia's mom is from the Philippines and her father is Black, from Southern Illinois. Her parents met while her father served in the military. Her family practices a Pentecostal sect of Christianity that originated and is headquartered in Jeffersonville, Christ Gospel Churches International. All these circumstances hold significant influence in Sonia's life and add


42 Christ Gospel Churches and many Pentecostal churches differ from other Protestant churches through their adherence to Baptism in both water and “the Holy Spirit,” seen through such gifts as speaking in tongues and Divine healing practices. Sonia's church emphasizes the difference of their believers to other Christians.
complexities to the experience of growing up working-class in a culturally Southern midwestern city.

She describes her parents' educational background as follows:

My mom went to high school in the Philippines, however she didn't go on to college because my grandmother discouraged her from becoming a teacher. She kinda always regretted it so she pushed us really hard to, like, study hard. And then my dad, he got his associates from technical school, like Polytechnic Institute or something like that. Like a trade school? That was the highest level of educational achievement of my parents.

Sonia comes from her mom's thwarted ambition and immigrant hope, her dad's hard work and economic struggle. Our town is almost symbolic of this on a larger level. When Sonia looks around our hometown, she sees in other residents what has also stifled her parents. If she were to stay in Jeffersonville, would this be her future as well?

Why do we leave the places that have made us? Sonia tells a layered story of what got her from Jeffersonville to her college campus three hours away—a college campus at which she spends the majority of her time now, even with holidays and breaks. What she told me explicitly centers around ambition and mobility. When I asked her about what values in her family contributed or didn't contribute to her attending college, she spoke of herself in contrast to her family:

I don't know, from when I was little I always knew that, I just always knew that this wasn't the life for me. Like, I'm not gonna work 9-5—or, I'm not gonna work paycheck to paycheck. Because I've just seen my mom struggle. Like, she doesn't have a job, she had health problems, we just didn't have the money for things. So I was like, oh hell no, I'm not staying here, I'm not working minimum-wage jobs. There's no way. If I can get out, I'm getting out. So, any way I was gonna take.43

In this instance, Sonia is invoking the lives around her as motivation to get out of Jeffersonville. The prospect of struggling in the way her family has—in this instance, her

43 Sonia Ross, Personal Interview, July 11, 2012. All quotes from interview, unless otherwise specified.
mom—is what makes her want to get out. She brings up the fear of working a minimum wage job and her life experience with her family working paycheck-to-paycheck. What prompts Sonia to leave—and to stay gone—is fear. Fear of poverty, fear of the broken dreams of her mother, fear of becoming like the residents of Jeffersonville. Education does not appear specifically in this interaction, other than my question, yet education is an acceptable reason to leave. She goes back to track her mom's actions in preparing them for education only after placing her personal ambitions in context of the question. She says:

And I realized my mom had prepared us real young. Because we didn't have a TV, so we—we—up until I was in like 5th grade—we didn't have a TV. We only got to watch movies. They didn't hook the antenna up because of religious things. So we were always reading books...And so we were always reading books and so education was always a really big deal. So books were how we escaped. We read books about traveling, we read books about the world...And in school, I realized, I would know things about shit the other kids wouldn't know because I had read it in a book.

There's never any explicit mention of college as an expectation in Sonia's family, but she talks as if there was. She says that her mom prepared Sonia and her three sisters when they were young for college, but it is likely that there was never any explicit preparation for college. The ambition for your children to attend college is different than holding the knowledge of the steps it requires a student to attend college. In Sonia's home, education was emphasized due to religious observance and the belief that the children could have more than her parents.

Having known Sonia through most of my educational life, I have observed her verbalization of her experiences—as mixed-race, as the first on her mother's side to be born in America, as a member of a Pentecostal church that centers its religious identity on difference, and now as a first-generation college student at a college away from home—shift and change as she has developed vocabulary and experienced events. Having known Sonia as one of my closest friends for about four years, I know something that is personal to us both, but much more intensely and rightly so for Sonia, is the experience of translation. Sonia is constantly
translating multiple worlds and multiple viewpoints. We can relate in one of her worlds: that of coming and going between a culture of academia and returning to a community that is largely anti-intellectual and working-class, where we are both consistently confronted with the struggle of speaking to our families after learning the terms for our experiences and spending half our lives in a world of privilege that our families could not envision even if they could visit. In our colleges, however, we have been forced to deal with our feelings of inferiority in classes, with our feelings of bitterness and resentment toward our wealthier classmates who speak as if they have a right to these intellectual spaces in which we struggle to speak. Yet, in many ways, this is the only time our experiences of translating interact or overlap. This is my connection with Sonia and this is where I begin her story.

Sonia's experiences, although she rarely explicitly talks of them in such a way until speaking of her college experiences, are highly racialized and complexly so due to her position as a mixed-race person who is both Filipino and Black. She describes the conflict in navigating racial networks and identities in her personal life when I asked why her family was such an important part in her going to college.

I think that a lot of people...especially because I present black, people see me as black, they don't see that a very big part of my mom's culture has had on me, when I was young. It's a part of my legacy, it's a part of my story, like family...And it's like, the Black community, people from the Black community they always say like, "Oh she puts her Filipino identity over her black identity," it's just just like, no. My Filipino identity lies with my family...Like, me and Stephanie, whenever we leave we feel guilty because we're abandoning our family...And it's really crazy, you feel like you're the lifeline. And you kind of see it, because it's like one person can change an entire family's history. Like, my mom coming to America changed the course of her entire family's history. Like, the money that she's been able to send back has, like, changed futures.

This quote is important in understanding Sonia's world. Due to what she views as the fractured nature of her father's family who hails from Southern Illinois, she views her mother's family in the Philippines—who she has met once, on a recent trip funded by her school—as
the defining vision she has for the meaning of family. Yet she also battles with the concept of what it means to prioritize her racial identities. She has been told by the Black community that she prioritizes a Filipino identity while also feeling like her Filipino identity is being made invisible. She walks a fine line.

In this moment she also reveals a felt dichotomy between what it means to leave her family and that she has to leave to earn enough of a living to help her family. Calling herself “the lifeline” is no small thought—she feels pressure through being the first in her family to go to college in multifaceted ways. She pictures herself in this situation as a lifeline to her family in the Philippines as her mother has been, but also to the family in her own household. Sonia lives with her mother, father, sister and her sister's two young children. She feels a deep obligation—which not perceived as an obligation—and connection to her family in the Philippines. Thus begins a description into her life and self-concept as a first-generation college student, navigating many worlds and never quite satisfied with her position in any of them.

Racial Identities and Complicating Mixed-Race Experiences

Much of the research and literature on the experience of being mixed-race in the United States focuses on the experience of what it means to have one parent who is white and another who is a minority, and serves to explicate much of the difficulty in choosing an identity in a society with a White Supremacist history. In one article, analyzing the effect family structure and identity has on children, the author mentions the differing experiences of minority-minority mixed-race youth to minority-white mixed-race youth, but only provides an in-depth exploration of patterns found amongst youth whose families are Hispanic and White, Black

and White, and Asian and White.\textsuperscript{45} Some of this information is still useful in analyzing parts of Sonia's life, for instance how she navigates her participation in the Black community at her school—but it falls short in helping analyze why she never felt she actively participated in the Black community before coming to college and even during her first year of college, preferring instead to stick with her religious community or international students as her primary social group.

One author proposes the concept of “bicultural” identity, which does seem to fit Sonia's situation, although the article does not address the function of Blackness in the United States and therefore also leaves gaps in describing the liminal experience of Sonia between racial identities and perception. The article does provide an interesting view in what it means to navigate cultural identity when one parent is not from the country in which a child lives while the other is:

The bicultural family provides an intriguing context in which children learn to belong and not belong, construct and de-construct their identities, through the embodiment and trading of personal perceptions of cultural sameness and difference. Conceptual fluidity contrasts with practical edginess in the child's endeavours to forge viable but flexibly differentiating identities. While for adults these remain frozen in cultural difference and distance, for the child these are contextualized and compressed.\textsuperscript{46}

Leverette emphasizes the importance for many biracial individuals who have a parent who is black to participate in the Black community in order to connect with the Black community:

Although the one-drop rule has functioned from the White supremacist perspective as a guard against the intrusive taint of Blackness, it has provided a positive basis for identification and solidarity within Black communities...Because many mixed race individuals have sought to progress in White supremacist culture through passing as White, those who assert a mixed race identity or who problematize a Black identity within those of mixed race are often seen as denying their Blackness and/or worshipping Whiteness.\textsuperscript{47}

Knowing the importance of the Black community to Sonia in college as well as the challenge to fitting in within it for her, I asked her if having that form of community was as important to her before college.

No, because before college I had...I had my Pentecostal people. Like, I wasn't really invested in school and fitting in at school because I had something outside...like, my Pentecostal friends were always more important to my school friends. No offense. It was like, they were always more important because that was the world I was brought up in. Like, school, it was never about fitting in. Because I never could fit in. I'm Pentecostal! What the hell, like, what am I gonna do, party in my skirt, my long jean skirt? No, that's not cute. So it was like, we always had each other's backs. Like, because it was a whole 'nother world that we had to live and people were talking shit about our world so we would stick together.

In this instance, Sonia complicates identity by telling of a large portion of her life—in fact, the majority of her life—where she felt that any form of racial identity was secondary to her religious identity. When Sonia tells this story, she reveals the distinguishing factor of wearing long jean skirts and not fitting in due to her religion as the paramount identity she perceives for her social networks in high school. Yet she goes on to analyze her experience within the Pentecostal church further:

And we did bond, the black ones from the Pentecostal crew, we did always bond—like the mixed girls, we were always called. But it was like the women of color, like the black ones, we all really stuck together and we're all still really tight now. Like, it was really important because we felt the tension between, like, the middle class whites who basically have quite a bit of clout within the church and us, we felt the tension, especially when it came to competing for boys—we didn't even feel like we were competing for boys, but apparently we were! When it came to boys, or when it came to, like, attractiveness or looks—recognizing that there's this huge wealth gap between them and us.

It is within the church that Sonia breaks apart the racial dynamics of her social ties: that the people with whom she was most close were those who were “mixed girls” like her. Her position as a racialized individual is, of course, not invisible to her, however it seems in this description that there's a hierarchy to her identities in high school, and that is that religious
identity came first due to the isolation felt first and then identifying according to race within the Pentecostal church.

Sonia did not just exist in the Pentecostal church in Jeffersonville. Sonia held a specific position in her family, in her neighborhood, in her school, and in the town—just as everyone does. Much of Sonia's descriptions of herself are based on her perception of herself within different spaces—this is where the performance of translation becomes essential. Because even though Sonia personally identifies as both Filipino and Black, she is perceived in most spaces as Black. Upon delving into Sonia's educational experiences, I learned that her experience as a mixed-race individual navigating Black and White charged spaces becomes even more complex:

I was always kind of like the black kid in the white classes who was black...was white enough to pass but I never wanted to. Um, and I think I was...when I went back to—especially in high school—when I was flipping between honors classes and just college prep classes I would like, change, I would, like, shift identities. I was that black kid who was studious but they never called me white, they never called me white which I find fascinating. I was always made to feel like I was illegitimate, like illegitimate as a member of the Black community, but I think that's just double-consciousness in general, but they never called me white. Because I always, always showed them that I knew where the fuck I came from. Like I knew. I didn't have to talk like you, I didn't have to listen to the same music, but I would talk to you like a fucking person...And just that translation between both worlds was incredible during high school. I had to cross a lot. And I oftentimes, I felt like I was defending people. Because, like the way teachers would talk about students, especially black students, I was sitting there just like, if you only fucking knew! Like if you only fucking knew. Like you don't fucking know them, you don't fucking know them!

Even in this instance, Sonia is speaking to a translation experience, in which she uses her position as an honors student to question the racism of her high school teachers while remaining part of her neighborhood. Sonia, even though she identifies most closely with her religious community and the people of color within her religious community in high school, feels solidarity with the Black community especially when she felt that teachers were being oppressive and presumptuous. As someone participating in honors and college prep courses,
hearing about people in her own community yet being excluded in teachers' words as part of it
due to her position in the school, she felt the need to “defend” students of whom she felt the
teachers had no concept. Her mentioning the need to “cross” and “shift identities” in this one
narrative helps to frame her entire experience in school and how she perceives her place within
her college campus today and how she defines her role in the world. Sonia's experiences
translating between her community life and her role in her high school was in some ways a
preparation for what was to become of her classroom situation at Depauw.

Why is this important to dissect these early experiences to understand Sonia's
experiences as a first-generation college student? How is her experience illustrative of a larger
cultural experience yet also intimately unique to Sonia's own experiences? Sonia lives a life of
in-between spaces, wherein she feels she belongs, but is never fully immersed. While this isn't
solely based off her experience of leaving home and attending a private college cultural worlds
away from that in which she has grown up, the experience of once again having to translate
between cultures, yet this not even being “where she comes from,” both exacerbates the
constant translation work she feels compelled to do while also creating a source of bitterness
and resentment not felt before college.

Translation and the First-Generation College Experience

When I say “translation,” I mean it in the most open-ended way I can imagine: I do not
mean moving between two literal languages spoken, I mean the act of taking two (or more)
moments, acts, situations, or verbal patterns and acting as the mediator between those who do
not understand the other side. I know from a number of personal conversations that this is how
Sonia views her role within each community in which she participates—and it does feel like
this, each community instead of communities that are fluid. Her worlds can seem stark and
divided and the only way to bring them together is to play the role of the mediator. While for
many first-generation college students their acts of translating and mediating experiences are not as stark as Sonia's, there is an applicable story here, and that is why I have chosen Sonia to explicate this experience as illustrative of one piece of the first-generation college student experience.

Although Jeffersonville is a diverse community, especially in the context of many other Indiana cities and towns—with the exception of urban centers such as Indianapolis or Gary—its schools function much as many within the United States; they are segregated largely due to the tracking system which separates students sometimes as early as elementary school into what is generally broken down into “regular/low-achieving,” “average/college-prep,” and “gifted/advanced.” While these appear and are certainly framed as objective designations, as with all social structures, this system exacerbates historically rooted oppressions and ideas. Tracked schools, even when the schools themselves are racially, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse, are frequently segregated along these exact lines. Sonia, along with one or two other students of color I remember, was in many ways isolated in our school's honors and advanced placement track. As she explains previously, she often felt like she was defending students in lower tracks who the teachers seemed to be disrespecting. Yet Sonia's experiences in the school as well as within the church speak to her constant negotiation with white people and white culture, and how this has become essential to her identity in some ways.

The experience of having to constantly negotiate her close contact with the limited middle-class white community in Jeffersonville through the wealthy elite members of her church deeply effects how Sonia negotiates her college which is filled with the upper-class

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48 See Daniel J. McGrath and Peter J. Kuriloff, “‘They're Going to Tear the Doors Off This Place’: Upper-Middle-Class Parent School Involvement and the Educational Opportunities of Other People's Children,” Educational Policy, 13, no. 5 (1999).
white midwestern elite. Having had to appeal to the understandings and culture of the white, upper-class in her church, she feels as if she has more experience “understanding white people” than many of her urban African American classmates. She speaks of her work in the classroom of using stereotypes of Black women to use against white men as well as make the space more comfortable for herself:

It's something like, you exploit you...you act like a stereotype and people respond to you! And I was sitting there [in class] just like, I don't understand how you think this is real! This is caricature. It's a caricature. And my professor even told me, she pulled me aside and she was like, during a meeting she was like, “You act like a caricature, who are you?” and I was like “I don't know, it's just kind of, like, interesting to me. That they actually think this shit is real!” So she was like, “I think it's a disservice to yourself,” and I'm like, “Yeah, I can see where you're coming from but it's also like, how I'm negotiating this space because I didn't feel safe in it,” so yeah...I'ma be a caricature!

She goes on to explain how members of the Black community dislike that she makes herself into a caricature but that she does it in an effort to bring the entitled “white midwestern boys” in the classroom down.

There was this one person that got mad and she was like, “I will never be anything but real, dadidididah...” and I was just kinda like, you don't fuckin' know, like, I know how these people think. I know how these white midwestern boys with their privileged backgrounds think. I know that when I come at them and like, shut down their opinions in this very stereotypical way, they don't know what to do with themselves! It really, really hurts! It really, really hurts. But I love it! Because it's taking something down. It's like, it's taking something down. And I feel like I'm accomplishing something if I can...if I can cut you down, I cut down your opinion that comes from this very privileged and terrible terrible place. I just don't understand how people speak with authority about shit that they don't know about. And that really, really bothered me.

Sonia later elaborated on this particular situation on what it means for her to act like a caricature:

I just don't take things seriously. I'm smart. I know I'm smart, but it kills me to talk like the white kids in my classes who use words like caveat. This particular class was my National Security class. It had some of the brightest political science majors in the class, but also the most out of touch and wealthy ones. They started talking about people's fathers who owned super pacs and I was completely mind blown. Who has this much money?
I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't talk like them. I started hating my own voice. I
didn't want to use their words, so I started cussing. I gave off an “I don't give a fuck”
atitude. I pulled out the angry black woman, and they ate that shit up. I cut their shit
up. I would slice and dice people's statements, because they were so basic and so
surface level it was tragic. My professor is from Queens New York, has a thick accent,
and seems to understand a lot more about the way the world works than her students.
She would set me on people when they said silly things. She told me about it later how
she would try to give me a look that told me to go for it. Some times I did, but other
times I pretended not to see because these white people looked so fragile in their
ignorance. And they were people, and I liked them even if they did horrible things.
I don't think people realized that I was just trying to breathe. That it was a reaction to
stagnant air and a stale space.
It wasn't so much that I wanted to exploit myself, but I was. I needed some place to
hide. I needed something to hide behind. I couldn't have them looking in on me. I was
too raw already, dealing with all I was dealing with emotionally. Their voices were so
terrible in the space. Especially the white men who wore really proper clothing to class
and spoke as if they had a right to speak. That broke me because I rarely hear people
who speak as if they have a right to speak. And they were speaking with such authority
about things they knew nothing about. Other countries were just shapes on a map to
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who speak as if they have a right to speak. And they were speaking with such authority
about things they knew nothing about. Other countries were just shapes on a map to
them. 49

Sonia's experiences in the classroom require her to protect herself within the way she knows
how while also attempting to find a way to fight against what she views as wrongdoings. To
her, doing this means that she must appear one way as a stereotype while knowing she is far
more complex, and constructing this “caricature” to subvert the power structures in her
classroom. Darlene Clark Hine introduced a concept relevant to Sonia's actions on the “culture
of dissemblance” amongst black women due to a history of domination and rape by both white
and black men that accounts for black women's appearance of accessibility to whites and
perform against their inner-reality. She states, “By dissemblance I mean the behavior and
attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually
shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” 50 In Sonia's interview
she does not speak to the fear of physical danger in her classroom or even on campus, yet she
is speaking to the racialized and gendered dynamic in her classroom wherein white men take

49 Sonia Ross, Personal Correspondence, April 17, 2013.
912.
up too much space and dominate the conversation in a way that attempts to erase other voices. She acknowledges that acting as a stereotype according to these men in order to shield her true self is the only way to get her voice heard in the classroom, and that is how she navigates that space as a woman who is seen as black on campus. Indeed, since Hine coined the term, it has been extended to describe instances when African Americans act “black” according to white stereotypes of blackness to navigate oppressive spaces. Yet it has always been controversial in the Black community as it is viewed as not serving to change oppressive racial discrimination.

Dissemblance also served to protect blacks in a volatile environment, where the wrong word, gesture, or look could have grave consequences...And though dissemblance did not subvert racial boundaries, it did afford African Americans a modicum of protection while helping to foster an “atmosphere inimical to realizing equal opportunity.” So long as they continued to act deferentially and outwardly acquiesce to the racist status quo, whites were never forced to challenge their own construction of black inferiority.51

In Sonia's interaction with the classmate who was angry, this is perhaps the source of some of the conflict, yet Sonia sees herself as using this to actually bring about change in the classroom. Since she believes that the classmate who was angry with her did not have the experience with white men the way she did, she believed her actions the appropriate form of getting them to listen. It is her experiences within her church, school, and community which she feels brings her intimate knowledge of the proper ways to interact with white people to illicit the greatest amount of progress in dismantling their oppressive opinions and ideas expressed in class.

Sonia's ways of navigating college—a space that will never quite seem like it belongs to her as a working-class, biracial woman who identifies publicly as a Black, first-generation college student—are in how she has always navigated her worlds. She tries to find the way to bring her knowledge of people, ideologies, and situations together. As someone who embodies

the tension of the intersections of multiple identities, when she witnesses these tensions play out in the world, she seeks to bring them together, to mediate—as she has always done within her own self.

*Bridging Worlds*

What does it mean as a first-generation college student to bridge worlds? How could you not? Even if someone does not have the wide-reaching tensions of multiple experiences and identities that Sonia lives, the experience of leaving a working-class, anti-intellectual space into a space which highly regulates language, dress, and forms of knowledge is one which can seem like an impossible world to piece together with the world prior.

And this is where Sonia's experiences and mine merge once again together. As first-generation college students inside differently structured private liberal arts colleges, it would be easy to conclude that our experiences within the college would be difficult to translate to the other. This isn't untrue; we struggle to explain our college environments to the other, how classroom discussion takes place and the precise cultural environments that both schools contain. However, some of our most intense conversations have centered around much of the hurt that has occurred in our classrooms, in our interactions with our peers outside of the classroom, and even with our close friends. As Sonia has learned to speak up in her classroom by invoking stereotypes, we have all learned coping mechanisms to deal with uneven power dynamics and the pressures to be knowledgeable in an environment which discourages the personal in exchange for theory and—although not explicitly—the strutting of “expertise” by young academics. For those of us who have been raised by those dismissed by traditional schooling—high school drop outs and part-time vocational school attendees—the idea of taking up space with those whose families are not only well-educated but who have been
raised to become well-educated themselves, is not only daunting but can often feel like an exercise in speaking an entirely different language.

Even once we pick up the language of academia, the translation can be so complicated that it becomes exhausting. Bell hooks states on her experiences within academia:

Throughout my graduate student years, I was told again and again that I lacked the proper decorum of a graduate student, that I did not understand my place. Slowly I began to understand fully that there was no place in academe for folks from working-class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind. That was the price of the ticket. Poor students would be welcome at the best institutions of higher learning only if they were willing to surrender memory, to forget the past and claim the assimilated present as the only worthwhile and meaningful reality.\(^52\)

For many of us first-generation college students, we are never explicitly told we lack the “proper decorum” for our place in academia, but if we are to become fully part of the academic culture, it means losing parts of our home culture—and this loss either way is precisely what bell hooks is referring to. In her interview, Sonia never speaks to the experience of translating her two worlds directly. In fact, at one point she basically accepts this inability to bring these two worlds together as fact:

Kayla: How do you think your family understands what you're studying?
Sonia: Political Science? Not at all! I just kind like don't talk whenever politics comes up. Like, people in my area, I just don't, I just don't talk. Because why talk? How do you explain these really complex systems of like anything? To people. Because it's not what they know! Like, it's not, so. I don't talk.
Kayla: Well how do you think they understand it? As opposed to how you understand it, because you...
Sonia: They think it's like, they're like, “Do you have a backup plan for that?”...I don't even think they think about it anymore because when I was like, going into college they were like, “What are you going to take?” and I was like, “Political Science,” and they were like, “Why not nursing? Or something like that, something that will make you money...Political Science really isn't gonna get you a lot of money. For me it's kinda like, uhhh, yeah...They don't really understand it. Besides the fact that I travel and study politics. But that's the extent of it, I don't think they really try to understand it. They don't want to. Too busy.

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There are a number of key points Sonia brings up in our interaction here. First, it
strikes even me as compelling that Sonia—who seeks to bring together all of her worlds in
some way, who is constantly translating her experiences to others—speaks of how she actually
doesn't try to translate what she studies to her family or to those in our community. This reads
as if of all the things Sonia translates in day-to-day life, speaking of her studies in college is
the boundary. It is impossible, or at the very least simply not worth it. People don't want to
understand it; they are “too busy.” Second, she addresses the divide when it comes to what are
viewed in our community as practical studies (nursing, teaching, etc) as opposed to essentially
useless studies. These are, for the lack of a better phrase, studies for rich people. Sonia who
studies Political Science falls into the later category. And while Sonia views this as a pathway
into a number of different professional fields such as politics or law, those in our community
view studies which do not lead directly into a permanent job as useless. Related to this is how
Sonia acknowledges that the only understandable parts of what she studies are that she travels.
Her major has allowed her to go on a number of trips abroad and her full-tuition scholarship
has paid for those trips. She says later that her travel is a “tangible aspect of my education that
they can feel. Like they can't really see me making good grades or anything else, but the
traveling, I think, and doing stuff with that, is something they can feel and see and be proud
of.” This is Sonia's only way of translating the experience of attending college to her family.

I am unsurprised; my own family goes so far as to make fun of what I study when I
attempt to explain it to them. They do not mind that I study education—and this is frequently
how I frame my studies, as education and not as anthropology or even history, since education
is accessible—they mind that I have formed opinions that come from my experiences in
college, that come from reading and talking to classmates. My opinions do not come from
home; I am claiming expertise when people like us have no right to expertise. The way I
frame my opinions—which unlike Sonia I do not remain silent on within my family—are with a sense of knowledge and authority that alienates me from my family. Sonia knows as well as I do, that people such as ourselves—from families like ours—are not supposed to hold opinions with authority or knowledge. That is for others, those who are richer than us, those who are on television. Our families are fine that those people exist, but they cannot fathom us to be in the process of becoming those people. And we know that to do so would be to forget where we came from.

Perhaps it is true that even for Sonia, college becomes the only frontier which cannot be translated back-and-forth. I know that much of the pressure she feels in college, however, comes from a sense of familial obligation and a knowledge of those to come. And, in many ways, Sonia's attendance in college feels almost life-or-death to her. As she says earlier that one person can change an entire family's history, the knowledge of her sister's college attendance and her own are those which may permanently alter their family's history. She puts the pressure to do well in college this way:

Like, my freshman and sophomore years I was definitely stressed, beyond belief, because I was like, “I have to do this, I have to do this for my family, I'm studying this test for my family.” I was like, this is my family, I have to do this for my family so we can't...so we won't starve! Or something like that! But it was like, that intense! There's no way I'm getting out of here besides this is for my family...Like no way, we've come so far we can't go back. It's kinda like that. Like, I'm not going back, I'm not struggling again, I'm not doing that again. Like it's that serious. So, I seek every opportunity to do well. And I have done well, it's just like if I'm not making 4.0s I feel like I'm failing. Which is really bad, I think I can't...you can't make a 4.0 in what I'm doing and be mentally and emotionally okay.

For Sonia, although she cannot bridge her academic and home worlds, she still feels pressure—to the extent of questioning the ability to remain mentally and emotionally “okay” while doing it—to highly achieve for the sake of her family. This can unroll into a predicament of her experiences never being good enough. There is the pressure that this is her one shot—if
one wrong move is made her entire future may be jeopardized since she has not net to catch
her unlike many of her wealthier classmates. There is also the knowledge that with her
accomplishments in college lies the future of her family. As much as we've heard in college
that those who are privileged are already set up to retain their family wealth, as much as we
know that the odds are stacked against us, what other choice is there but education? For Sonia,
despite the difficulties, despite the challenges in translating her multiple identities into a
legible united personal identity, education remains the only way. The pressure she feels is not
something a person could, in good conscience, chastise her for. The pressure is real, she is not
making it up. Education is a form of survival; despite its demands to erase the multitudes of
experience in Sonia's life, education is the only way to escape the troubles of home while
remaining attached.

**July 17, 2012**

*The river with its winding longing, secrets and muck, represents all things constant
here. This is my last summer at home. Sweet tea will always remind me of this place.
Goodbye to honeysuckles and mulberry trees. To doom heat. The smell of here I will
carry with me.*

*Cutting off my hair. Cutting off old glory. Protection from demons comes from my soul
now, not my body. I want to take anointed oil with me just in case bad spirits are
transient...But I have to believe that our lives are already blessed. That we are not
fated to live with the pain of this place forever. That the Ohio is not the river Jordan,
and contrary to my father's stipulations...this is not the Promised Land.*

*So we keep moving. Always moving. The only way I know to stay alive.*

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53 Sonia Ross, from a personal message, used with permission.
Chapter 5

Bad Kids and Good Kids: Invisible Tracking in a Jeffersonville Elementary School

There is one moment from my field research at Northfield Elementary School that I will never forget. I was having a conversation with Taylor, a legend of sorts at Northfield—blonde, mean, and full of ideas about how to hide his paper weaponry arsenal from Mr. Jackson. I asked him what smart meant to him.

“Smart means that you do what the teacher tells you and do all the work he gives you.”

My mouth may have actually dropped. Is this what kids actually thought about intelligence? I went with it. I asked, “So Taylor, do you think that you're smart?”

“Well sometimes. Because sometimes I do what the teacher tells me and do all the work.”

Taylor's entire perception of whether he was smart or not appeared to be dependent on whether he obeyed rules. By his definition, I was surprised he believed he was smart at all. Determined to push Taylor to think this through a bit more I asked him again, “Well, are there any other kinds of ways to be smart?”

He took this moment seriously and thought for a minute. I was glad to see Taylor in this context, thoughtful and serious. I took note of it, that isolated from a classroom he seemed out of place in, that Taylor was exactly what I had expected him to be all along: A highly intelligent boy who didn't find the school a comfortable space. He finally looked up and said, “Well yes. There is another kind of way of being smart and it's when you have parents who are already smart and they are always doing things to make you smarter in class and they help you with your work so that you get As in school.”
This time I really was left speechless. Taylor had just broken down cultural capital at nine years old.

I made sure to tell him what I had observed for the last four months of him: that I believed he was one of the most smart kids I had met at Northfield, that even though his way of being smart was not the kind of smart they wanted students to have in school, that it was still smart to be able to make so many things and also to always get away with hiding them from the teacher when the other students could not. I also reminded him of the first time I had met him and his friend, Adam, and I had tried to help them find an answer to a science worksheet and I said it was one answer while Taylor thought it was another. Adam had said, “Dude! Just listen to her, she's a teacher!” But Taylor didn't. And Taylor turned out to be correct.

“I did that?”

“Yep. You don't just believe adults know the answers even though they're older than you. And you're right. Because adults don't always know the answer. And they make mistakes all the time too.”

Taylor nodded. And he smirked, the same smirk I had grown accustomed to when he was about to do something that could get him in trouble. “Yeah, yeah, that's true.”

Taylor was not a bad kid. He was frustrating, rude, and demanded attention from any and all who would give it to him. Yet Taylor, in his two years at Northfield, had developed a reputation amongst nearly all the teachers with whom I spoke. Taylor, despite the evidence of so many other rebellious and rude students who also attended Northfield the teachers did not hold this opinion of, was basically beyond redemption.

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54 Taylor Jones, Personal Conversation, December 12, 2012.
Northfield and the Changing Demographics of Jeffersonville

The first day I walked into Northfield, when Tiffany Bruner, a teacher on maternity leave, showed me around the school and talked to me about my project, I noted how much Northfield felt like a community. The teachers, students, and office workers seemed happy. Compared to my previous experiences at schools, it felt nice to be in a school where the people who filled the building did not seem exhausted or burnt-out. When I said this to her, she told me that she felt like this was a true statement: that she couldn't imagine herself anywhere else, that she felt happy and supported as a teacher at Northfield. Over and over again, when I asked teachers to describe Northfield, they would tell me the same thing as Tiffany had told me. For the most part, the teachers at Northfield love their job despite the challenges that come along for all teachers. And for the teachers who have been at Northfield for over a decade, the school has undergone a great deal of change.

According to the School Improvement Plan from the spring of 2012, Northfield Elementary School has 412 students, meaning the school is fairly small and does not have the issues of classroom overcrowding that many urban schools face. The student population demographics are as follows: 55% white, 18% Hispanic, 12% multiracial, 10% African American, and 4% Asian. The plan notes that “there has been an increase in students of Hispanic, multiracial, and Asian ethnicity, and a substantial decrease in the percent of white students who attend Northfield Elementary.” It also notes the changing economic demographics of the community they serve: “In the fall of 2001, 35% of the students received free and reduced lunch. In the fall of 2008, 66% of the students are receiving free and reduced lunch. Our current percentage of free and reduced as of May 31, 2012 is 78.6%.”\(^{55}\) This information upset even my own knowledge of the community, which I've always regarded as

one of the more well-off ends of Jeffersonville. However, as the report makes clear, the demographics of the neighborhood have changed even as I have left Jeffersonville for college in 2009. Yet much of this makes sense. As I noted in my introduction, the economic recession has hit the entire city of Jeffersonville hard. Northfield is also the “Limited English Proficient” (LEP) magnet for the entire school corporation, meaning that it pulls students who are determined to not be proficient in English across three towns and cities within Clark County, Indiana, ranging from rural to semi-urban in Jeffersonville.

Northfield's school mission and belief statement is affirmative, yet still rooted in the idea that individual behaviors are responsible for school success in students. It states:

Staff behavior will direct school climate, and respect will be demonstrated by all staff and students in all settings, with both students and staff members taking ownership of individual behaviors and academic outcomes. All staff believes that high expectations produce academic achievement through student engagement, positive student behavior, equal opportunities to learn, tailoring instruction to individual learning needs and styles, and through utilization of community resources.

Northfield adheres to a mutual respect policy and does in fact adhere to an emphasis on community involvement, that in my experience seemed to bring in diverse parents and caretakers. I was surprised to see this, but obviously happy to see that the school seemed to be a welcoming space for many families.

I spent 3 days a week, and approximately 5 hours each day at Northfield, primarily observing and assisting in classrooms. I was frequently placed in roles that teachers were used to college students occupying: I would observe as many pre-service teachers do in classrooms, offer individual and small-group tutoring and support, run copies and grade papers. As I became more familiar with the individual classrooms and their dynamics, I was also given more opportunity to serve as what could be called a teacher's assistant. For instance, in both

56 Northfield Elementary School, “Mission Statement” and “Our Beliefs.”
the 4th and 5th grade reading intervention classrooms in which I observed, I would lead the readings groups through schoolwork and projects and often review lessons with students. Because of this role I often held, I was often able to channel students' exhaustion and frustration with school and work into questions about why they disliked school and how they viewed their roles in the school. Due to my position in support roles as well, I was also able to better connect with “trouble” students, which undoubtedly forms my position in this project. My sympathies lie with the students with which I spent the most time; these are the students who are also most frequently forgotten in public school systems as well and invariably of concern to me in my project.

What was I looking for at Northfield? I was looking to see how a working-class community does education—to see firsthand the complexities of the students' lives and how they are all navigating their family life in combination with their school life. Having interviewed my friends on their family experiences and their school experiences and how this lead them to college, I was curious to see how youth's experiences today are lived out in the school. Having heard so much about my friends never feeling allied with teachers and lacking support in their classrooms, I wanted to see if the same problems faced students today, and possibly ask students how teachers could better support them. These thoughts and questions remained prominent in my mind as I went about my semester at Northfield, but as I became more immersed in the school, things of course became more complicated. The community being my own community and the school nearby my home sometimes felt completely foreign to me. This is because, as much as there are general theories of education to use to analyze any given school, I had expected the school environment to be more familiar since it is the community in which I grew up. While I did come to feel personally invested in the success of these students, I also realized that many if not most of the students at Northfield were living a
life I was not familiar with. Jeffersonville has been changing and Northfield is not the same kind of school I attended when I was younger.

Northfield is far more philosophically complicated than I had originally believed it would be. Teachers held knowledge and beliefs about culturally relevant education that was emphasized in their school improvement plan hand-in-hand with post-racial ideas about not seeing race. An excerpt from the School Improvement Plan that further explicates how many teachers are thinking about cultural relevant (or “appropriate”) teaching strategies yet may not want to define them as so is as follows:

**Culture Q1.** Are culturally appropriate strategies utilized in classrooms (racial, ethnic, language-minority, cultural, exceptional learning, and socioeconomic groups)?

**Answer:** About half of the teachers feel they use culturally appropriate strategies and take race, ethnicity, cultural differences, and socioeconomic status into consideration when teaching their students. Most teachers feel they use appropriate strategies when teaching students who have English as their second language.

As well as from the Implementation Plan on school culture in the document:

**Strategy 1** - Develop differentiated classroom activities to support subgroup needs to master open ended questions.

**Strategy 2** - K-5 teachers will use “cultural modeling”, that is modeling as a vehicle for identifying ways of connecting everyday language practice to academic skills and for building on the resources of students from critical subgroups, such as Hispanic and Limited English students, in order to expand students’ ability to work with the various tools and practices that they will use in both home and school contexts.

**Strategy 3** - Teachers will be aware of cultural differences; pairing LEP students with:
1) good peer models during Think/ Pair/ Share.;
2) provide visual clues;
3) use repetition and consistent use of vocabulary;
4) focus on vocabulary, word banks and word walls;
5) pre-teach/ teach/ reteach content-vocabulary and concepts;
6) use graphic organizers;
7) use daily journals, dialogue journals and language experience approach for writing and other appropriate teacher strategies to guide and support the learning and language development of students with diverse backgrounds.57

It is also differently diverse than the elementary school I attended in Jeffersonville. Located on the other end of town, Bridgeport, the school Sonia and I attended, was not confronted with a

large Spanish-speaking population; the issues at Bridgeport were related to low-income families and how much of the neighborhood lived in government subsidized housing as well as historical racial discrimination for Black families in a school where most teachers were white. Having gone in expecting to find teachers grappling and struggling with the same economic and racial conditions with which I had grown up was a mistake in my own judgment of Jeffersonville.

_Framing the Project_

I spent four months at Northfield in multiple classrooms. I was in kindergarten, third grade, fourth grade and fifth grade, as well as a special education classroom for students with behavioral issues and fourth and fifth grade reading intervention classrooms. Much of my focus was on fourth and fifth graders, however the kindergarten and third grade classroom did ground a great deal of the ideas I was thinking through about how teachers thought about students transforming from simply kids to “young men and women” with responsibility and independence by fifth grade.

Northfield is not an “urban” school in the sense that is located in a downtown center and faces the typical incidences of school violence and upheaval. However, many of the students of Northfield are poor and as the school racial demographics suggest, the school is actually more diverse—that is, having a student population with students from many ethnic as well as socioeconomic backgrounds—than many urban or suburban schools with forced integration. There are a a good deal of research on urban schools in an age of resegregation and how they recreate prisons and push students through in the school-to-prison pipeline. While it is not my purpose to illuminate the complications of desegregation and the school-to-prison pipeline, one source sums it up quite well for these purposes:
The consequences of unequal education have become more severe because employment and income are sharply linked to education than in the past. Post-secondary education is essential to significantly share in the benefits of economic growth, and the availability of well-paying manufacturing jobs with low educational requirements has declined greatly. High school graduates with no college or technical training have also experienced serious economic decline as educational requirements are increasing. High school dropouts find themselves in jobs that pay only half as much as a quarter century ago, in spite of the greater wealth in society. Those who drop out are far more likely to end up in the mushrooming prison population with staggering costs to the economy.  

While this is an ethnographic piece to illuminate the stratification in one specific school, the issue of students “destined for a life of crime” was never brought up in my time at Northfield. In a number of other Jeffersonville schools this might not be the case, however, Northfield distinguishes itself from schools across town in Jeffersonville, despite the reality of their school population which may actually be economically struggling than some of the more central schools in Jeffersonville.

Therefore, in this ethnography I am not trying to explicate—and could not attempt to know since I only spent four months with the students at Northfield—the long-term results of schooling on elementary students. I am, however, arguing that students are divided early in their schooling experience—between “good students” and “bad students,” “troublemakers” and “cooperative students”—and that these divisions and designations are highly racialized, classed, and gendered and based within white, middle-class standards of normalcy. One could, of course, hypothesize that the effects of these early divisions likely play a key role in tracking in middle school and high school; I do not have the long-term research to support this hypothesis. Yet there were many times at Northfield, especially when I got to know the fifth grade students, where I wondered how long high-performing minority students could endure the daily microaggressions I witnessed them experience from students and teachers alike in a

room with a majority-white population.

Good Kids vs. Smart Kids

As a general rule it can be stated that all smart kids are good kids, but not all good kids are smart kids. This is because students who perform well in class and on tests are considered good students and by association “good kids,” while kids who do not perform well in school must prove that there is something essentially redeemable about them—such as charm, a caring nature, or being respectful. In a space such as the American public school where the regulation of bodies is necessary and symbolic of success, the “good” is represented by an individual's display of self-control. While many have touched on this subject of the control of the body in the public school as representative to create workers and recreate the industrial economy, this does not change the fact that self-control and the ability to remain quiet form the definition of “good kids” in the school. The one exception to this rule, at least at Northfield, appeared to be high-achieving, “smart” students.

Jan Nespor writes about children's bodies in the space of school, summarizing both the pressures on teachers to maintain control and the pressure on children to engage in activity that is school-appropriate:

When a teacher's space is defined by the bodies of his or her students, the kids' bodily behaviors become the focus of attention. Teachers are held responsible for the noise and movement their kids produce rather than for what they know. The maintenance of calm and quiet serves as the index of teaching “success.” Denscombe (1980) pointed out that noise emanating from a classroom is taken to indicate the teacher's lack of control and a concomitant absence of learning. By implication, students who are noisy are thought to be engaged in illegitimate, nonschool forms of activity.

For example, one day while in fourth grade, there was a large car crash on the highway where


their windows in our classroom faced. When students began to see multiple police cars pull into a field in front of the school, they began to act out, becoming excited for the action that was taking place outside of their school. As an emergency helicopter landed in the field, hysteria filled the classroom, as some students ran to the windows and a couple others began crying from fear. The teacher had, quite visibly, “lost control” of the classroom. An administrator walked by while this was going on, and chastised the students while demanding the teacher close the blinds. Later, I spoke with a third grade teacher about the incident and she shook her head: “I'm sure he'll hear about that one.”

For teachers, losing control of students is a shameful taboo for which they are held responsible, however, when it comes to individual students and self-control they are expected to hold themselves to school standards or expect disciplinary measures.

Kids are kids, though. Even teachers will tell you this, that even the best kids “slip up,” show signs in school of misbehaving: being rebellious, sneaky even. This is to be expected. Most teachers I had the opportunity to speak to about their students would not hesitate to speak to me about the difficulty of not allowing students to fall into roles in their classroom. However, this does not mean that teachers did not place students into roles themselves. One of my favorite students, Jorge, was a third-grader who struggled academically. He was a favorite point of conversation between his teacher and me as we both were fond of him. Jorge was a “good kid” despite the fact that he was a struggling student. Once at recess, she joked that he wasn't exactly the sharpest kid, but you couldn't help but love him since he was so sweet.

She was correct: Jorge was part of the English as a second language [ESL] program and would be pulled at times in the day to work in that classroom—he performed low on certain reading tests and was allowed to be taken in the hall so he could read his tests aloud, was in

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61 Field Notes, December 5, 2012 and December 7, 2012.
62 Field Notes, November 16, 2012.
math intervention, and frequently struggled to follow directions in class. I was never quite sure whether Jorge's difficulties from school in reading came from not being a native English speaker—he did incredibly well in spelling—or his chronic inability to focus. Jorge was a sweet person though; he was always trying to help out the teacher and would rush to help out students when they were upset or having trouble doing something. He cared deeply for his family, always bringing up his mother's pregnancy and his anticipation for a baby sister. At recess would always make sure to spend time with his cousin in kindergarten between soccer games with the third-grade boys. He was also rarely disruptive in class, instead often sitting in silence for long periods of time not doing work. The only time he would actually get into trouble was when his not doing schoolwork interfered with the pace of work in the class, not following directions. Jorge's body rarely impeded teaching time; on top of this he was a sweet student. Because of this, I was told over and over again: “He's a good kid, but...”

There was an interesting occurrence which happened midway through the time I spent at Northfield in Ashley Griffin's third-grade classroom: Jorge began dissolving into an anxiety I had not yet seen in him. The first day I recognized it was when the teacher was reading to the class as I walked into the classroom. I did not catch what he did that finally felt like the final straw to Ms. Griffin, but she told him, more firm than usual, “Jorge, go color.” Coloring in this classroom was the disciplinary system in her classroom. Certain color codes went with certain behaviors that were not aligned with classroom norms. The day affected me deeply, as not only do my field notes from the day focus on the events surrounding Jorge, but I also wrote a number of reflections on my impressions of what seemed to actually be going on in with Jorge. The following is an account of the day:

_Jorge is getting in trouble during reading. He has to color and I guess this has happened enough today that he loses ten minutes of recess. All I know then is that he is extremely unhappy—I have to force him to line up for the spelling game. His best_
friend Stephen keeps asking him what's wrong, but it's the game and he can't answer. Stephen stands beside him and rubs his back to comfort him, which strikes me as unusual even for third grade boys, but I'm also glad to see this genuinely supportive relationship. I read lines with students for the Thanksgiving play. Jorge is in my last group and he is sullen to the point of refusing to read. I ask him to stay with me when we're finished.

Kayla: Do you want to talk to me about what's going on?
Jorge: I lose ten minutes of recess.
He said it like a death sentence.
Kayla: Tell me why this feels so bad to you.
Jorge: Because at my last school I lost ten minutes and then I had to leave!
I ask him if he was known to be a troublemaker at his last school and if he was afraid that would happen now. He doesn't answer but I see tears well in his eyes before he puts his head down.

Kayla: You know, Jorge, sometimes we get in trouble and it feels really awful. But no one here thinks you're a bad kid. Your teacher doesn't think you're a bad kid. Because you're not. You're Jorge. You're a great kid Jorge.
When he finally looks up at me, he says, “I hate this school.” He is nine years old.63

Jorge's final remark left a deep impression on me. I reflect a few days later:

I know it was just him having his moment. But it broke me up. I can see Jorge trying so hard sometimes. He really is a great kid. And I really did have to tell him that. But I never thought I'd hear something like that from Jorge in 3rd grade. "I hate this school.” I think I can let a lot of stuff pass over me. But I don't know if it will ever stop hurting to hear a 9 year old child utter those words for the first time. There's so much being said when those words are uttered. They contain so much more than the literal meaning of the words. To hear hopelessness and exhaustion in the voice of a 9 year old. I could go my whole life without ever hearing it again.64

My fear with Jorge, I know, seems to be precisely his own. For Jorge, losing ten minutes of recess felt like a death sentence, and it was not because he had never been in trouble before.

For Jorge, what seemed to be happening was a fear that he would be cornered into the role of troublemaker, as he had been in the past. I do not know Jorge's history at his former school. I do know his panic concerned me—it was not the Jorge I knew. I was not lying to Jorge when I told him that his teacher did not view him as a bad kid. At recess that day I joked with her that Jorge walked to his loss of ten-minutes of recess as if he was walking to his own death and she just shook her head, laughed, and talked about how fond she was of him. Even though to the

63 Field Notes, November 16, 2012.
64 Field Note Reflection, November 19, 2012.
teacher, Jorge was far from filling the role of a troublemaker in the classroom, for Jorge the fear was incredibly real as he had held that role before and he knew how damaging it was to his place in school. I worried, with the onset of this incident, that Jorge would find his role where he had previously—as a troublemaker and thinking of himself as a bad kid. Knowing that Jorge's position was already compromised as a student who was not considered smart, I was concerned about what would become of him if his behavior continued to be regarded as inappropriate.

What of the students who do achieve good grades and do well on tests in the school though? In my experiences at Northfield, students who received good grades could almost always get away with more than the students who did not. I developed a somewhat conflicted relationship with a fourth-grade student named Deirdre—a cheerleader who instigated much of the bullying in the classroom, but was rarely held responsible or even seen. In many ways, Deirdre introduced me to the ways in which it seemed high school cliques played out in this elementary school setting. Deirdre was an African American student who almost always scored well on classwork and tests. However, her friends did not.

There were a number of girls I most often saw her with in class: Katie—a white cheerleader who was in my reading intervention class with an expressive face and a tendency to “mouth off” when she became upset. I originally faulted her with the bullying but quickly came to realize she was rarely at fault for it. Tiffany—a Latina student who was not a cheerleader who was much slower than other students during testing and who received lower grades on classwork. Tonya—an African American student who spoke African American Vernacular English and generally did not perform well on tests, usually quiet except for “disruptive” humming when she did work. Having gotten a fair idea of the dynamics in the classroom, where Deirdre never got into trouble, I was able to note only one instance when
Deirdre was chastised for her actions and it was when the teacher reached a breaking point.

One day after a classtime consuming altercation between a number of girls, the 4th grade teacher stopped class to look at Alexa as she bobbed her head at him when he walked by: “I've had it with the drama, drama, drama in this class.” The students all stopped for the moment, but afterward it only seemed to exacerbate the issues. Later that day, there was some sort of argument between Deirdre and Chelsea that Tiffany had also become involved in. After what he had said earlier, the teacher immediately demanded that all three girls “turn a card,” the disciplinary system for minor misbehavior where the colors range from green, yellow, and red. While Chelsea and Tiffany immediately got up, Deirdre shouted, “What?! This isn't even fair!” and as the teacher attempted to reason with her, I realized that he was not going to make her turn a card. Deirdre was capable of being reasoned with regarding her behavior, the other students who were not so smart, were not.

When I brought this up to Ashley Griffin, the third-grade teacher who had previously had Deirdre, on Friday during recess, when we were talking about how “out of control” the entirety of fourth-grade as a class was, she did not deny that Deirdre was frustrating, sneaky, and very much a bully. She was quick to chalk it up to her parents though, that Deirdre was extremely spoiled, so what could you expect? She turned my attention then to Tiffany and how Tiffany was becoming a bully and how, like Taylor—the fourth-grader of teachers’ nightmares—was mostly just mean without any motivation.

With the fourth grade boys, a similar situation also seemed to play out. One day I observed Josh—the only student I interviewed who told me his parents went to college—and Taylor passing notes. Having noticed, my immediate impulse was to tell Taylor to stop, thinking that before Taylor would get in trouble yet again, I wanted him to calm the situation.

65 Field Notes, October 31, 2012.
In that moment, I was forced to check myself: why did I immediately want to place the blame on Taylor? Josh initiated the passing of the note.\textsuperscript{66} Even I knew in the moment, however, that Josh would not get in trouble. Josh did well in class, and he was known to be fairly soft-spoken and thoughtful. In the coming months, I would get to know Josh better and understand why Josh and Taylor were friends: they were both basketball-playing boys who liked to make jokes at the expense of others. Taylor was nearly always perceived as an ill-willed bully. Josh was hardly even noticed at all. Josh would frequently gossip to me about other students, telling me what embarrassing thing had happened to one person or another in the class. However, Josh did this quietly and in transition times, when speaking was expected. Taylor, on the other hand, seemingly spoke whenever the impulse hit him. He did not know how to do school, and school was not engaging to him. He was a bad kid in teachers’ eyes not because he said mean things, but because he did so openly, causing chaos.

*The Disrespectful Students, Catty Students and Where They Exist in the Classroom*

Difficult students demand attention. For teachers, with little time in the day to fit in teaching what they're supposed to, there is little time to address the root of much of the behavioral problems in class while also doing their job as teachers. Teachers have little choice but to regulate students’ bodies for reasons stated previously. Their jobs are at risk. Most public schools are also not set up for the free use of bodies in education. If one is to look around the average American public elementary classroom, there will almost always be an arrangement of desks (whether they are arranged collaboratively or facing a teacher is a personal choice for teachers), occasionally spaces for learning stations, some sort of board for writing, and a desk for the teacher(s). There are a number of ways to arrange these spaces, but these are the resources provided to educators; the assumption rests on the industrialist thought

\textsuperscript{66} Field Notes, October 17, 2012.
of the masses who will not work unless their bodily autonomy is regulated.

With school structures reflecting the power structures of larger American culture, this means that any student who is not white and middle-class or wealthier, often receive the brunt of symbolic violence within the school system. Symbolic violence is defined by Pierre Bourdieu as “relations and mechanisms of domination and power which do not arise from overt physical force or violence on the body.” Far from schooling simply being boring for these students, it can be an act of violence upon their cultural life. Adding another layer to this argument, parents who live in poverty often lack the cultural and physical resources to effectively advocate for their children in the public school and may already feel distanced from the school themselves after these acts of violence were performed on them when they attended school. “School-appropriate” behavior may not even be a recognizable behavior for some students when they enter school, while for white middle-class students the classroom and most of the teachers already reflect their home culture.

Some children come to school with more accoutrements of the culture of power already in place—“cultural capital,” as some critical theorists refer to it—some with less. Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal for education is for children become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them. This is a very reasonable goal for people whose children are already participants in the culture of power and who have already internalized its codes.

In Delpit's description of the “culture of power” she is speaking of white, middle-class dominant culture in classroom settings; this is particularly important to note when not only is it school culture as a whole that reflects this culture of power, but when individual teachers reflect this culture when their students do not necessarily.

All of the teachers I worked with at Northfield were white. The only classroom teacher


I noted who was not white was Natalie Ross—Sonia's older sister—who taught second grade. Although white, many of the teachers came from the region and most came from a working-class background themselves. Thomas Jackson, the fourth-grade teacher, even made note of this when I asked him about his own family educational background:

They say, you know, I was at an assembly-type thing with a bunch of teachers in it and it was really weird because he said, “Who are the first generations to go to college?” and you might be doing it because of this, but almost everybody in there raised their hand. And he said that teachers are usually the first generations to go to college.  

The fifth grade teacher, Sandra Lee, who was born and raised in Jeffersonville also told me how she was the first in her family to graduate high school and college, and how this became an important message for her to share with her kids: that if she could go to college they could too. Yet, as white teachers, living a middle-class lifestyle that is incredibly different from many of the students at Northfield, there still appears to be a disconnect at times. Students expect teachers to embody a certain “teacherness,” which reads as conservative and middle-class. For instance, when I forgot to wear a bracelet one day over a tattoo I had on my wrist a number of students called out to me about it, one even went so far as to say, “Umm, Ms. Hogan, you have a tattoo! That means you're bad!” It is not that many of these students likely do not have members in their families who have tattoos or piercings; in fact, it is exactly that. For these students, teachers are supposed to appear different than their families, they're supposed to appear “good”—conservative dress, no visible tattoos or piercings, polite language. My small transgression of this code at once made students think I was bad, as well as causing them to take interest in me. I was at once bad and more accessible. I was more like them and less like the teachers in that moment.

This is to say that for many students, despite the reality of their teachers' class histories,

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69 Thomas Jackson, Personal Interview, November 7, 2012.
70 Field Notes, November 2, 2012.
they do not read them as “like them.” The institution itself alienates them from closely creating that connection. Teachers, for many of the students coming from working-class or poor backgrounds and additionally so for non-white students, become the culture they represent instead of the class culture from which they originate.

Few of the students at Northfield are white, middle-class students; however some perform this identity more than others. Julie's Bettie's ethnography on girls, race, and class at a California high school distinguishes class location versus class performance:

I came to define students not only as working- or middle-class in origin (problematic in itself), but also as working- or middle-class performers (and synonymously as non-prep or prep students). Girls who were passing, or metaphorically cross-dressing, had to negotiate their “inherited” identity from home with their “chosen” identity at school. There was a disparity for them between what people looked like and talked like at home, and their own class performance at school and what their friends' parents were like.71

At Northfield, the students recognized as both good students and good kids were the ones who at the very least performed a middle-class identity in the classroom. I would also argue the students whose families were most involved in the school while performing these middle-class identities fared best. If teachers approved of parents' actions and involvement with their students, and the students were well-behaved and performed well in class, these students were perceived as the very best. There is little surprise to this, however the dimension of interest is that very few students were actually middle-class. The performance of a school-sanctioned identity is all that really seemed to matter at Northfield.

In the fourth-grade class I observed and interviewed, there were two students who stood out to me as white, working-class students who were read as difficult or troubled, and in the case of one, as a “bad kid.” Taylor Jones and Katie Turner were students who I viewed almost as male-female equivalents to each other. Both were white, blonde students who

actively protested their teacher's assignments with loud sighs and “that's dumb”s. On one of my first days of observation, I witnessed Katie verbally challenge an accusation of bullying a student and slam her hands on her desk. At first I was shocked at the physical and visible challenge to authority I saw in Katie, but in time I would come to regard her as a girl who was quite intelligent and sensitive, who had a grasp on the gendered classroom dynamics probably better than any other student in the classroom and who refused to tolerate it. Katie and I had a rocky relationship at the beginning, yet as I continued to work with her, communicate with her, joke with her in both her classroom and her reading intervention time, Katie and I actually came to a respectful relationship. In her interview, I asked Katie about what she struggled with in school, having experienced my initial hesitation with Katie and coming to understand her more deeply as a student:

Kayla: Okay. And what do you think is the hardest part of school for you?
Katie: Focusing.
Kayla: Focusing, why?
Katie: I gotta keep on writing stuff, it's very hard, I'm like ughhhh.
Kayla: So is it boring or is it just hard for you to--
Katie: Yeah, it's boring. It's very boring, it's very boring.
Kayla: What makes it so boring to you?
Katie: Um, because all you're doing is being really, quiet, just write some stuff down. But the only thing I like about that, is you learn new stuff.

In my time at Northfield, I came to understand Katie as a passionate student, yet this was rarely seen in her. When Katie was involved with her work, she was involved; there was no stopping her. When she was not engaged, however, she would not keep her discontent quiet like many of the other students. In this way, Katie was viewed as abnormal to classed and gendered expectations of students in the classroom. Katie's passion for learning “new stuff” struck me as important to understanding her—despite work being boring, she would focus on school if she felt as if she was learning something. Otherwise, she sat with her head on her

72 Field Notes, August 29, 2012.
73 Katie Turner, Personal Interview, December 5, 2012.
desk, rolling her eyes or passing notes. She was not unintelligent, particularly difficult or
disrespectful. She simply did not fare well when she felt she was not learning. Katie became a
lesson for me on how some female students are framed as dramatic and troublesome simply
due to their atypical gender-acts. Katie—outspoken, sassy, and forward—does not fulfill the
expectation that girls quietly fight with each other and act as passive participants in the
classroom.

As for Taylor, his anecdote at the beginning of this piece tells wonders of his position in
the school. Taylor came from a private Christian school in the Louisville neighborhood of
Portland, a neighborhood understood to be one of the more violent and impoverished areas of
Louisville. At this school, Taylor told me one day, there were a lot of fights and you had to
defend yourself physically (and, based off much of his behavior I would also argue likely
verbally with comebacks) to get by. Taylor did not grow up in the Northfield culture or
community. On top of this, Taylor having come from Portland as well as having a family
which he seemed to feel some anxiety about when I discussed speaking to his family, appears
to come from a family culture which is not in keeping with the environment at Northfield.

Most students know how to “act” at school. Students know what to do and what not to
do generally from the enforcement of discipline. However, this may not be in line with their
home cultures. Students also may conflict with white, middle-class authority structures in a
number of ways. When students do not observe the dominant school rules of “respect”—
which is not necessarily translatable cross-culturally, as differing ethnic and class cultures view
respect differently—they are viewed as troublemakers. Respect in the school, as I have
witnessed, is a form of politeness and deference to the teacher as the loving, but strict

74 Field Notes, October 3, 2012.
75 Field Notes, November 7, 2012. Taylor shook his head hard when I mentioned talking to their parents as well
as them in interviews.
disciplinarian. Yet this enforces the symbolic violence of a hidden curriculum meant to disallow students' varying cultures through discipline. The demand for politeness in schools “contains a politics, a practical immediate recognition of social classifications and of heirarchies between the sexes, the generations, the classes, etc.”76 School rules influence heavily who is viewed as a troublemaker and who is not, however, this distinction is also complicated again by achievement level in the classroom. If a student cannot conform to the middle-class rules in the classroom as well as to the expectations placed on students in a high-stakes testing era to do well on tests and school assignments, they are condemned to a lower rank in the school by educators.

*Tracking in an Untracked School and Future Implications*

Walking in that Monday to Sandra Lee's 5th grade classroom after Thanksgiving Break, something was a little different. Looking around the room, the desk were still lined up in two groups, with desks facing each other to facilitate group work with “elbow partners” and partners across from students. But the students in the desks were different. I recognized a few from the classroom with which I had become familiar, the kids who excelled in math. I scanned the room looking for more fifth grade faces I recognized.

From the back of the room, I heard an excited whisper, “Hey Ms. Hogan!” It was Jonathan Salazar, one of my favorite students in all of Northfield.

After learning that they had in fact decided to separate math groups in fifth grade by ability-level, I was excited to get to know Jonathan outside of his reading intervention group on Fridays. The first time I really spoke with Jonathan was during the transition period between fourth and fifth grade reading intervention. This was maybe my second time in the fifth grade reading intervention group. One of the fourth grade students, Jose, was still

finishing up his work as the fifth grade entered the room. I began talking to the fifth grade, but then remembered to give directions to Jose for where to leave his work when he was finished.

“Hey Jose...”

Jonathan jumped up, distressed. “My name's not Jose! It's Jonathan!”

It took me a few seconds to piece together what was going on, what Jonathan was upset about since he seemed so reserved and polite. Then it hit me: Jonathan thought I had called him Jose because he was Mexican.

I quickly remedied the situation. I pointed to Jose, sitting at the table. “Oh no, Jonathan, I know your name, I was talking to Jose from fourth grade who is still working on his worksheet.”

The question immediately came to mind: how many times has this happened to Jonathan? How many times has he had to correct a white adult in his school about his name? How many times has a white adult carelessly mixed his name up with another Latino student in his class? I tried to piece together the stress and exhaustion this would cause me if it had happened to me throughout my life. Jonathan was likely sparring me the brunt of his feelings.

The surprising part of Jonathan's reaction to me was that after our initial moment of misunderstanding, he was far more warm to me than many other students in the class. As much as I genuinely enjoyed fifth grade students in general, Jonathan became a quick favorite. Kind, easy to communicate with, and generally laid back, Jonathan was the kind of student I imagine teachers dream about having. So when I saw Jonathan in my fifth grade classroom, and he was excited to see me, I was overjoyed to work with him as an “advanced” student and not a student in need of remediation.

The fact remains though that I was excited to see Jonathan as an advanced math

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77 Field Notes, November 2, 2012.
student. I knew this was a good sign for him as a student. In the classroom on that first day of instructional stratification, Ms. Lee was giddy but stern with her students: “We're going to move fast. For some of you who are here, but don't score as high on your tests usually, you might have to move into Ms. Johnson's classroom. We have to stay above 90% average on all of our tests, that's the requirement for being in my math classroom.” Even I was scared, and I had gone through honors tracking in middle and high school. She made sure to emphasize the importance of them paying attention and doing their work—they'd be in middle school soon, they were all young adults now.

Looking around the classroom, I noticed the class was still quite diverse for this fifth grade, but not quite as diverse as the mixed-group of “ability levels” when Ms. Lee was with her actual classroom. Of about 24 students, about 8 were non-white students. As I walked around the room, it became apparent that there were students who preferred to have me check their work, or the teacher check their work. Jonathan was one of the students who preferred my assistance, as I would work through multiplication problems with him and then leave him to figure more out since I had noticed he seemed to struggle more with multiplication than some students in the class. I spent more time in this fifth grade math class thinking about what would happen to these students than anywhere else. Here were Northfield's best and brightest, and with the constant emphasis on middle school preparation, I could not help but wonder whether these students would remain tracked in middle school. I had my ideas about who would be though. I knew that the students who had parents who knew how to navigate schools were at an advantage to be tracked into advanced or honors courses upon entering middle school:

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78 Field Notes, November 26, 2012.
Mothers of higher social strata are more likely to select college preparatory classes for their children and have their children placed in higher academic tracks. These parents are more likely than less educated and working-class parents to understand the ramifications of placements in college preparatory tracks for their children's later educational and economic opportunities. Even among children with similar course grades, the children of more highly educated mothers are more likely to be placed in college preparatory courses.79

What does this mean for Jonathan then? And the numerous other students caught in the middle of high-achieving students, and the constructed “average.” In Mrs. Lee's fifth grade math group, I was forced to confront a question I have been grappling with most of my life: how did I get to where I did in high school, and even college now? How could these students get there if they wanted to? In what ways might the experience of being one of the “smart” students be uncomfortable or even impossible for students of color or working-class students who do not perform middle-class identity? I spent a lot of time in the math group thinking about my conversations over the summer with Sonia and Shay. I knew that Shay had spent time in high school in and out of the “honors bubble” of Jeffersonville High School. Those spaces were not comfortable for her. And despite my ability to “pass” as middle-class as a white girl performing a different class identity than I originated, I was never fully comfortable in those classrooms either. Students are framed in a meritocratic lens of smart and hardworking, or less intelligent and frequently less hard working. While some of this is viewed as innate—you either are or are not smart—I came face to face with young students who begged the question: do they ever get exhausted? I imagined being Jonathan would require balancing a great deal of agitation and rage, even at his young age. Would it be worth it to be a “smart” student, but never fully part of his classrooms?

Researchers have found that the reactions of whites to people of color display subtle discriminatory behavior, less assistance, greater aggressions, overt friendliness paired

79 Daniel J. McGrath and Peter J. Kuriloff, “They're Going to Tear the Doors Off This Place': Upper-Middle-Class Parent School Involvement and the Educational Opportunities of Other People's Children,” Educational Policy, 13, no. 5 (1999), 605.
Jonathan expected from me when he met me a degree of covert, “accidental” racism when he thought I was calling him Jose. As he came to trust me, and as many students came to trust me throughout the semester, I would see them watching me as I would attempt to mediate student-on-student bullying incidents. With my liberal arts, social justice, anti-racist education in tow in my hometown, I imagine I was an individual with whom many students and educators were not familiar. I acknowledge that I also had the time to deal with these situations more thoroughly since I did not have to stuff a day's worth of curriculum into very little instructional time. Perhaps racist and classist remarks from students are ignored in the classroom because teachers simply do not have the time to fully respond to them. Yet, layered onto each other, the exhaustion of students facing these remarks inevitably results in some sort of disengagement at the very least. Diversification of the teaching force at all grade levels is necessary, as well as cultural education in teacher education that goes beyond “cultural relevance” in the classroom.

Conclusion

Getting to know the students at Northfield, I was constantly confronted with my simultaneous comfort and disorientation. Conducting research in my own city meant I recognized spaces where the community gathered, what local places were viewed as off-limits (such as Louisville, five minutes away, yet many students did not even know the name of), and had somewhat of a grasp on the conditions in the region. I was layering my interviews with my friends and my own experiences in school to attempt to understand if schools at the elementary level pushed certain students to the forefront and held certain students back. Curious to see if early elementary experiences mattered in forming academic identity and

comfort as much as I felt they did, even I came out of Northfield feeling confused. There is so much being culturally organized amongst students and teachers in the elementary school. What stood out to me most at Northfield was students who were being read as “good” or “bad” on the basis of academic performance. The implications for this are that students seem to begin school with much of their educational fate laid out for them. Students who do not fit in with the school norms are compelled to make a space in some form for themselves. Coming back to Taylor, I realized that having been pushed out of the norms of acceptability at Northfield, he struggled to take control of the situation more or less successfully. His disruption of class was a way of proving that he could maintain some form of power in a space that served to disempower him:

These acts are especially meaningful for those children who have already been marginalized as outside of the community of “good,” hardworking students. For the boys already labeled as troublemakers, taking control of the spotlight and turning it on oneself so that one can shine, highlights, for a change, one's strengths and talents. Already caught in the limelight, these kids put on a stirring performance.81

For students who seem to fall in-between one of the roles they can fit into, such as Jorge who teetered between a role as a “good kid” who struggled academically, or even Jonathan who was a “good kid” who performed well academically but not as well as most other “advanced” math students, much remains to be answered. My concern for students like Jorge remains in how students acceptability in the school relies on their ability to physically control their bodies; if Jorge continues to act out, will he be regarded as a good kid? If he is not longer considered a good student, will educators chalk it up to his status as an immigrant Latino student? My focus on Jonathan throughout the semester was because I wanted the best for him. Bright and kind, I knew he would be able to succeed in the school system if he could only learn to navigate the cruel microaggressions with which he was faced. He was an ideal

American student—except he too was a student who was not white or middle class, meaning he would face hurdles most students placed on an advanced track would not.

All this was of concern to me because of my conception that students in my hometown were not being given opportunities that should be available to them. Sonia and Shay in my interviews both expressed ways in which their experiences in elementary school caused them deep hurt and required disengagement from the institution. They made it into honors courses and into some of the best colleges in the nation, as did I. Yet we were all exceptions. We should not have been. In elementary school, there were undoubtedly students who were as smart as us. At Northfield, I realized that students like Taylor and Katie, who were incredibly intelligent, would almost inevitably not even have a chance into honors tracking. And although tracking is not unproblematic by any stretch of the imagination, it is still the way into colleges and universities across the nation. Even in the elementary school, it seems, students are being placed into levels on perceived ability. And, of course, even in elementary school, this system is racist, classist, and sexist.
Sonia, Shay, and I are not simply our own stories. Yet I tell this story precisely because I have never felt as if I am qualified to tell it. Working-class, first-generation college students are being written about by intellectuals, yet we are rarely told to write about ourselves as important sites of academic knowledge. Over and over I have emphasized the importance of telling these stories as individual stories to highlight the complexity of the first-generation college experience, so that the details are not lost in the conversation of larger systems. Yet the truth of the matter remains: we are here for reasons, our childhood friends and family members are not here for reasons as well. In different ways, we have each given up parts of our culture to continue onto college. As our academic vocabulary has expanded, our cultural language has been tightened. I can tell my professors, my middle and upper-class friends, even strangers the story of what it means to grow up poor and to go to college in a space of privilege. It has taken me four years to learn, but I now have approximately one-hundred pages worth of proof. In exchange for this language and knowledge, I have in many ways lost the language to talk to my family about my life. Sonia was right when she ultimately concluded that there was no way to translate our experiences in academia. I would be incorrect to say that I have not gained so much from college—networks, cultural capital, exposure to a world I never thought possible, words for experiences I could only feel aimless rage at before, more than just pictures and longings for the ocean—but I'd also be lying if I said this is not a story of great loss. And all the stories I've heard, included in this project and not included, only contribute to a larger conversation.
With the downward shift in the economy, there is much focus being turned again to the meanings of class in American society. We can no longer pretend America has been built outside of an aristocratic system; not only is the American Dream a myth today, but has been a myth always. I will not have my story or my friends' stories contribute to the ideology that hard work, persistence, and a little classic American ingenuity will make our experiences in poverty all worthwhile—that our legacies will be simply as rungs on the ladder to middle-class bliss and cautious comfort in suburban neighborhoods. Our stories, our experiences, our crippling fears that have caused us to reject our own families at times—they're all worth more than that. I owe it to these people who I love and I owe it to myself to refuse this easy label. We are not the American Dream.

I am tired of living in fear, my friends are tired of living in fear, and I am positive many other first-generation college students are tired of living in fear. The fear, at its best, can build itself up into rage as we see our classmates and close friends navigate networks and connections set up for them before they were even born. It can move us aggressively forward, it can fuel a senior thesis. Only a matter of weeks ago Sonia was flown to Washington, D.C. for a scholarship interview—$10,000 toward graduate school. She wrote to me from 10 hours away, the closest we've ever been while both still in school:

*I kept thinking how poor people can identify each other in a crowd of elites before anyone else. It's in the sarcasm. The roaming eyes in the way they want to choke out the names of fancy schools. They know they escaped. They know their degrees didn't teach them as much as one bedroom apartments, missing fathers, and fear. They know.*

I wrote this from love. I have cried over my computer, recounting my friends' heartbreak on paper because I love them, because they want this as much as I do. They want these stories to be told. I *need* these stories to be told. These are the stories that have gotten

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82 Sonia Ross, Correspondence, March 13, 2013.
me through college. The countless panicked messages sent from across the country, the tear-filled conversations on Shay's bed at Mt Holyoke. We have kept each other alive in academia. I write these pieces as an act of love, as an acknowledgment that this could not have happened without these people and their stories.

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I'm going to pretend someone is listening for a minute, because here is what I would say to you: you've gotta start giving us more credit. With every nervous stutter, every glance, every chewed fingernail we are telling you a story. We are waiting for you to listen. Overeager classmates with your well-thought-out theories on educational inequalities with boarding school educations: step back. Listen. I cannot and I will not speak like you. When I hear my voice hit a steady rhythm, it is in the twang of Kentuckiana, with angry, funny, poor people with tired faces. When I hear my voice in a classroom, it is a voice that haunts me. It comes from my mouth but it does not belong to me. It belongs to a skim milk middle-class with a distaste for spice and an enthusiasm for green vegetables I will never ever understand. I hate myself sometimes when I hear myself speak in a classroom, when I hear my voice shake over the steady eyes who know they belong there, who have always known they would be there. I will never feel as if I'm not betraying my family when I speak in a classroom. I can see my mom, afraid of what I've become. I can hear my brother laughing at me using words that do not belong to me. He knows. I know. There are times I feel as if my limbs are floating outside of my body. This is not me who is here. But it is. And I am speaking. We are speaking. Maybe, for once, you can try your hand at translating. Maybe, for once, you can fall silent in the crowd. Because we've got a lot to say. It just might not be what you want to hear.

Professors with your confusion and exhaustion when we do not speak and you know
we have something to say: listen. Step forward. When for so many of us a college classroom feels like a foreign land where nothing honest comes out of anyone's mouth, it is your job to figure out how to make us understood. There is not a simplistic solution. When students come into classrooms from multiple backgrounds there will always be a struggle to balance their skills and forms of knowledge. However, the understanding that some students have attended schools that encourage discussion in small classrooms that prepare them for liberal arts college classrooms while others have not means that some work must be done to make those who are not comfortable in these classes feel more at ease.

For schools as larger communities, making it easier for students to reach out to each other is essential. In my four years at Hampshire, I have rarely felt as if I had a way to get to know people like myself and form community to make the contrast between my home culture and school culture less difficult. Layered in multiple identities that make college difficult, Sonia has sought solace in the Black community at her school, but typically sticks with poor or working-class women within the community, which she believes is essential to her success in school. As I have reached my fourth year at Hampshire, I have met working-class students who are the first in their family who attend college and I seek to show them that it is possible to navigate the college and that their frustrations in class and on campus are not simply their own, but widely felt by others. Make for ways students can seek support from each other and they will.

As for the students at Northfield with whom I spent my first semester of my final year of college, I felt deeply attached to their futures as I watched them navigate a school system which did not have their best interests at heart. While their teachers cared deeply about them, I witnessed so many moments of dismay with these young students that I came out of the school feeling disillusioned once again. There were many days in Northfield I told myself, “Well it
could be worse.” And it could have been. The teachers at Northfield were all from the area, many were first-generation college students themselves and would encourage students to work to attend college, yet were realistic that college would perhaps not be an option for every students for a variety of reasons. They were loving, compassionate, and most understood the depth of poverty that their students were dealing with on a day-to-day basis. Yet a nearly all-white teaching staff and what I perceived as an inaccessibility of teachers as professionals to students meant that for many students in the school, teachers were not relatable in a way that their families were. Students were falling behind for reasons that certainly were not lack of intelligence or laziness. Northfield is not the inner-city school one hears lamented across media sources. I did not expect to find what I found there. In most conversations with these students, they agreed that they liked school, and they liked learning. But there would be small events that could diminish students for an entire day. By the end of my field study, I had trouble not questioning whether these small events were enough to exhaust students to disengaging from school as they continued. As I had observed with Javier and Jonathan, I came to understand that feeling part of the classroom culture is essential. I do not believe there is one way to make this happen in a classroom, but I do believe it must be done if we hope to see these students achieve.

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Today a friend who focuses in animal behavior asked me how many people who take social science classes at Hampshire are middle class white people. I told her that while it depends on the class, that the people who take up the most space in the classroom are nearly always those who are middle or upper class. Why are their voices filling the classrooms about experiences they have never had? The other night I was having a conversation with a brilliant friend of mine from a working class southern family named Tyler whose own life stories blow
mine out of the water. Tyler told me that since coming to Hampshire speaking has become
difficult—lest life experiences prove to be politically incorrect, lest something Tyler's poor
white, southern family said prove problematic. Why is it though that when what my family
says, what Tyler's family says is offensive that fingers are pointed at us with blame, but when
my wealthy classmates—whose lives have been built on the backs of our families and those of
poor people across the world—speak inoffensively they are regarded as beacons of youthful
compassion and college activism? My family may not say the right things, but I can tell you
with certainty that they are not the ones responsible for the inequalities in this country. I
cannot say the same of the families of many of my classmates.

I did not come to college with this language, I did not come to college with knowledge
of social science theorists and radical educators. I came to college with fear, a complicated
relationship to my hometown and the only region I'd ever known, and a lot of stories I knew I
could not tell to the sons and daughters of educated professionals. I have lived the last four
years in a constant fight to not become someone's example—I do not want to be anyone's
success story but my own. At Hampshire, I learned how frequently socially aware people can
try to make those they view as part of their social project into victims. But I'm not a victim of
my circumstances. It has taken me four years to learn, four years to gather the voice and the
words some of these students came to school knowing—but now I know that in order to make
sure this does not continue to happen, that I must say something. The fear is something I never
anticipated when I came to college. That my family was something I should be afraid and
ashamed of, that my words were not good enough for the classroom, that if I spoke I would be
yelled at for my experiences of growing up in a blatantly racist community, that I would never
really get to the point where I felt I was bound for my dreams instead of destined to live out
my life in my hometown with a job I did not find fulfilling like everyone I have known in my
whole life. I have spent four years afraid. This project is an objection to fear.

Because educational inequality does not end at the college gates. And in private institutions such as the ones I have profiled in this project, the inequalities become exacerbated. I never really knew how poor I was until I came to college. In my high school honors-track classes, I was surrounded by the only students whose parents had college educations in my town, yet I could still find those with life experiences similar to my own. At Hampshire, I have struggled to come up with any. Only in the last two years have I come close, and in my experience we are so scared to talk about our family backgrounds after our time spent here for fear of insult that I'm surprised I have even found the few that I have. If it is not clear from the stories I have included that changes need to be made in our campus communities, and not only in getting students to college, let me lay it out in a clear manner.

At Depauw, Sonia relies on the black community for uplift. It is not that she was never close to black people in her community before college, but at Depauw the distinction becomes necessary. At a largely segregated college campus, there would be little way to survive the school with a sense of self without the black community at her school. The school is still alienating. Her professors still do not trust her. Still she is told that she should not be so angry, as if this is a thing you can be—too angry—as if our emotions are not justified by our experiences, as if we need to apologize for what has happened to us. Sonia still waits for the right moment to speak, she still translates to wealthy white men about her experience while knowing they will not believe her, while knowing she will always be viewed as too emotional.

Shay still struggles to feel like she has a right to Mt Holyoke, and when she does not do well on an exam, I have on many occasions comforted her as she questioned why she was at Mt Holyoke at all—she does not compare to her classmates, she only got in to fill a need for diversity, maybe she really isn't qualified for this education after all. She is. When her friends
list off unpaid internships and complain about not being able to work on-campus because of
the existence of work-study, Shay is faced time and time again with the reality that she is
falling backward even as she technically moves forward.

I was terrified I would never gain a voice in college. At Hampshire, surrounded by
people interested in the same ideas in which I was interested, who wanted to create positive
change in the world, I thought I would find people I could relate to, compared with those in my
hometown who were more focused on just getting by with their young children or majoring in
a subject for a job directly out of college. Yet when I actually got into the classes I found
interesting, I shut down. I watched people dominate discussions who had never directly
experience educational oppression, who knew nothing about being poor or being a person of
color or being any of the other forms of oppression we spoke about in our social-justice
oriented courses. They used words I did not understand for theories I had lived daily before
college. I would sit in class and hate myself. I began learning the words and theories not to be
a better social justice educator—after all, I knew about much of it from simply witnessing it in
my life—but to understand my own position in the educational system, and later to fight my
friends on their right to the space. I remember when I began saying out loud, third year: “I
hate rich people.” It was perfect, sitting in the kitchen of my mod with Rebekah. I was
immediately told, “Kayla, you can't say that.” I just rolled my eyes. She didn't like my
attitude. I didn't care. For the first time, I didn't care.

I have been given a lot of money by wealthy donors to Hampshire so that I can attend
this school, and that is why I am not supposed to be angry. I am supposed to be grateful and
stay quiet. Sonia, funded completely by a pharmaceutical company, is supposed to be grateful
and make their generosity worthwhile with a high GPA and stories of travel. Shay is
compounded to be doubly-grateful; grateful to her family for allowing her to leave and grateful
to her school for her scholarship which allowed her to attend college so far away from home.

But these are quality of life issues. These are issues of race and class being exacerbated in spaces that claim to be liberatory. These are stories not being told out of fear. I have moved past the fear and now I am angry. I am angry because I know if I don't tell these stories, they might continue to not be told. They might continue to only be whispered in closed-off rooms, in cars parked along the Ohio River.

I'm telling these stories because they are complicated, because I know the power of hearing someone's experience when it is similar to your own, because people are eager to hear the truth about educational inequality. I really do not think most of my classmates are ill-willed; I do not think they intentionally silence me. The same cannot be said for someone like Sonia. The truth of the matter remains that they are silencing a great number of people who have immeasurable knowledge to contribute to the conversations in their classrooms, and also to the ever-prominent conversation of how to get under-represented groups of students to college and keep them there. This project isn't much. I did not spend years researching multitudes of first-generation college students. I have only spent years living it, I have only watched the people I love the most struggle through the same things but with additional racialized conflicts in the school system. This is far from a complete account, or even a complete story. But it's a start.
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